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"BE HE MAN OR DEMON!" HE EXCLAIMED, "I WILL NOT CHALLENGE HIM AGAIN BEFORE I FIRE."

The Hunted Hunter;

OR,

The Strange Horseman of the Prairie.

A Romance of the Southwest Border.

BY EDWARD S. ELLIS,

AUTHOR OF "BILL BADDON," "SETH JONES," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CONFERENCE.

On a cold, rainy night, in the spring of 18—, two men were seated in a mansion occupying one of the most aristocratic portions of New Orleans. The apartment in which we find them bore evidence of the good taste as well as wealth of the owner. The elegant furniture, the yielding carpet, which gave back no sound of the tread, the ruddy glow of the grate—all these were suggestive of comfort and luxury, and upon this dismal night were in cheerful contrast to the storm raging without.

The two men occupied opposite sides of a table, on which stood several wine-glasses and a flagon of that beverage. Both had drunk but slightly, and their manner was unmistakably that of two persons about to enter upon a matter of importance. The eldest was Alfredo Seraville, who, though born upon American soil, inherited all the pride and prejudices of his Castilian ancestors. He was about sixty years of age, with a head partially bald, and with hair almost entirely gray. His countenance was devoid of that swarthy hue so generally characteristic of his people, and the golden spectacles which he wore, helped to give him the appearance of a respectable American gentleman. His dress was that of the country in which he was born—a rich suit of black. When speaking, his accent was slightly foreign; but, as he rarely used the Spanish language, except when conversing with one of that nation, few would have been able to judge his descent and education. His wife had been dead for twelve years, and he had but one child—Irona—who was now well verged toward womanhood. Upon her he had bestowed all the kindness of an affectionate father. All that wealth and love could do had been done for her. Only the previous year she had returned from Europe, where several years had been spent in receiving an education. She had left home a child, and returned a woman. Well, indeed, might the father be proud of his daughter. She was as amiable as accomplished, and doubly repaid the warm love of her parent. But a shadow had crossed their threshold—and this shadow was the cause of the present interview.

The visitor of Alfredo Seraville was a man about forty years of age—one whose precise nationality was not known even to himself. The Italian, Spanish, and American blood seemed mixed in his composition, neither predominating over the other. His close-cropped hair, which grew low upon his forehead, was black as midnight. His Indian blood was manifest in the high cheek-bones and black eyes. Beneath the latter were numerous "crow's-feet," while the forehead was crossed by several wrinkles, and a tuft of hair upon the chin, singularly enough, was perfectly gray. He seemed a person addicted to dissipation and vicious indulgence, inured to toil, privation and suffering, of a nature avaricious, secretive and vindictive, and one whose enmity would be fatal to any man. He answered to the truly American title of Colonel Ovaton.

"Before proceeding to business," said the latter, with a meaning glance toward the door, "it's my belief that it would be best to see that no other ears besides our own are likely to hear what is said."

"Eavesdroppers do not frequent my house, Colonel Ovaton."

"Oh!—it's all right, if you say so. I'm sure it makes no difference to me. I have nothing to lose. Are you ready to proceed to business?" asked Ovaton, looking steadily at his companion.

"Certainly, sir; I see no objection at all."

"Well, then, Don Alfredo," (the appellation of *Don* was always pleasant to the one addressed) "suppose you open the meeting by a statement of its objects, and your ideas about matters and things in general."

Colonel Ovaton had emptied his glass, and he now brought it heavily down upon the table, folded his arms, and leaning back in his seat, compressed his lips, and looked toward his host as if to invite him to proceed. The latter, leaning his face upon his hand, while his elbow rested upon the table, gazed downward a few moments as if perplexed and troubled. Then raising his eyes to those of his companion, he spoke in a deliberate and musical voice:

"You go to Texas to-morrow?"

Colonel Ovaton nodded assent.

"You expect to be absent a couple of months?"

"About that—perhaps not so long."

"How many go with you?"

"Three; Pierre Choujeau, Jacques Choutier, and the young American, Ross Welland."

"Your object, Colonel Ovaton, I believe is to penetrate a long distance into Texas—as far as the *Llano Estacado*, if I mistake not. You are sent out by a firm in our city for the purpose of learning more of that section than is known to us. They wish to establish, if possible, a trade or system of barter with the Indians in that section. Am I right in my surmises?"

"It's about as you say."

"You are not sure you will be gone more than two months?"

"That is the time I have set down for the men; but it is just as likely, if I come back at all, that it will be at the end of six weeks."

"The three men who go with you—including the young American—are employed by you. They bind themselves to remain with you, no matter how long a time you may be absent. For instance, if unforeseen circumstances should compel you to remain away six months or even a year, they bind themselves to stay with you. Am I right?"

"You are right, Don Alfredo."

"Well, then, Colonel Ovaton, the object of my sending for you this evening is to induce you to remain in Texas for *six months*, at the very least."

"What!" demanded Colonel Ovaton, looking toward his host in astonishment.

"Don't be surprised; I will explain all in a few moments. I suppose you can be *persuaded* to overstay the time which you have calculated upon?"

"I have not thought of the matter, Don Alfredo. If you will consent to make yourself clear, we will be better able to understand each other."

Seraville hesitated a moment and then proceeded:

"Of course, it is necessary that I should do so, and you will understand before going further that the matter is one which is entirely between you and myself."

A quiet nod intimated that that was understood.

"To come to the point, then: It is with the greatest pain that, during the past few months, I have discovered a growing intimacy or friendship between Irona and Ross Welland, the young American. How they became acquainted I know not; it is enough to know that they are too well acquainted. It is my wish—my resolve, that all intercourse between them shall end."

"Can not the American be kept away?"

"So long as they are in the same neighborhood, they will meet, and all the world can't hinder them. They must be *separated*."

A gleam of intelligence lit up the face of Colonel Ovaton, but he waited for his host to speak further.

"It would kill me to know this *Ameri* had won the heart of Irona. The blood of my family must never mix with that of his people."

"But senorita, like Don Alfredo, is an *American*."

"Born upon their soil, I admit; but not American, for all that. It was my intention, and the wish of her mother, to have my only child born in Spain, on the spot where my ancestors have dwelt for so many centuries. But circumstances have prevented, and the disgrace of the father has fallen upon the daughter. Her hand shall never be given to an *American*."

"Ross Welland," said Colonel Ovaton, "is no vagabond. He does not go with me—as do Pierre and Jacques—for the gold it brings him. He goes, he tells me, to see the country—to view its wonders, and in hopes of sharing some of our adventures. He has plenty of gold—the American is no poor man like Colonel Ovaton."

"That I know as well as yourself; but he is an *American* for all that; that is why he shall never be received into my family. Of him personally I know little and care less. He is from some of the Northern States; he has been in New Orleans hardly a year; for all you or I know, he may be a vagabond, and a bad man. But, as I said, that matters not. I have given my reason for refusing to acknowledge him as a friend or acquaintance."

"There is American blood in me, Don Alfredo."

"And Spanish too, and from your appearance, I should say about a dozen other kinds. Your insinuation is that I associate with other Americans. This is partly true. My friends, you will find, are from the country which I claim as my own."

"I have no wish to say anything against your prejudices, Don Alfredo. You are welcome to them. But, it strikes me we are wandering from business."

"Very true. You must know the cause of my dislike to this American. Can he be kept from seeing Irona, say for six months. I think he will never see her again, or at any rate not until it is too late to do him any good. This is the reason why I wish you to prolong your stay in Texas. Can I induce you to do it?"

"It will be a great expense, Don Alfredo. My men will require large pay for such work, and my employers may refuse to pay at all."

"They must surely understand the uncertainties and dangers of your journey. But that need occasion you no anxiety. What amount will insure you against loss?"

Colonel Ovaton sunk his hands into his pockets, frowned and looked up to the ceiling, as though running over some calculation in his mind. Suddenly compressing his lips, he looked at Seraville, and replied:

"Two thousand dollars."

"That amount shall be yours six months from tomorrow, if you are here to receive it."

"I doubt not your word, Don Alfredo, but in business, you know, *pen and paper* are generally used. It can do no hurt to put this matter in writing."

"Most surely not. I will return in a moment."

Don Alfredo passed out of the room and was absent a short time. When he came in he held in his hand a paper, upon which was written a pledge, signed by himself, to pay Colonel Charles Ovaton the sum of two thousand dollars, six months from date. The note was something more than a mere promissory one, as it contained a stipulation, in the form of a postscript, to be signed by the holder, in which he agreed to present it to no one except Alfredo Seraville himself. This, of course, precluded him from obtaining the amount before the expiration of the time mentioned. Colonel Ovaton read it carefully, scanning its construction, and finally ended by signing his name to the postscript. He knew that Seraville's promise was as good as gold, and his written pledge as valuable as the money itself. This paper was retained by Colonel Ovaton himself; but he signed another, which Seraville held. This latter was an agreement to remain in Texas for six months *with his companions*, and as much longer as was consistent with their safety. Failing to do this, he forfeited the sum of two thousand dollars.

"This agreement, I presume, is satisfactory to you," said Seraville, seating himself.

"Yes; both of us, I believe, are secure; but it strikes me, Don Alfredo, that you can make a better bargain than you have just concluded," added Ovaton, in a low, meaning voice.

"I am satisfied. I am willing to pay you every cent that I have promised, if you only do your part."

"You mistake me; that is not what I mean. As you have arranged matters now they are not *certain*. Why not be *certain* about it?"

"I do not understand you. You intend to fulfill your promise, do you not?"

"All abroad again. I am referring to *another scheme*—something entirely different."

"Explain yourself, then."

"You see, the young American may return at the end of the six months. An arrangement might be made to prolong his stay—in fact to make it—a—*a good while*."

"I am still at a loss to know what you mean."

"*Curai!* it seems your comprehension is dull, Don Alfredo. To be plain, then, I mean that we can easily fix matters so that the American—shall you know—shall *never return*! Of course, this would be a more important piece of work, and of course, would require a good round sum of money."

"Do you refer to *murdering* the man?" asked Seraville, with a recoil of amazement.

"Hist! never say *murder*; it don't sound well."

"Was that what you meant?"

"Some would call it that, but—"

"No, sir," exclaimed Seraville, indignantly. "You mistake me altogether, Colonel Ovaton; no such a thought has ever entered my mind. I am a man who knows such a thing as *honor*, and that which I have induced you to do, is no crime. All that I ask of you, is to assist me in keeping Irona and the American separate for a certain length of time. Do you understand me?"

"Oh, yes; I should dislike to harm the man, as he is really a clever fellow, but I kind of—you know—hinted at the matter to see how you would take it."

"I consider it a deep insult, sir," said Seraville.

"I ask your pardon, then; I am sorry that I should have made such a hint, when I have always been satisfied that Don Alfredo Seraville would never stoop to do anything which he was not willing to proclaim upon the housetops."

"Give me your solemn promise that you will never do or suffer harm to be done to this Ross Welland, while he remains with you."

"I promise."

"Then there is nothing left unexplained. Had I reason to believe that the least harm would befall this man from the agreement which I have made, I would cancel it this instant. What time do you start westward?"

"Early in the morning. I shall hardly see you again."

"It is not necessary."

"I will then bid you good-evening."

"I wish a pleasant and safe journey to you and to all who accompany you. Good-evening."

The host accompanied his visitor to the door, where they separated.

CHAPTER II.

ANOTHER CONFERENCE

COLONEL OVATON had been gone barely half an hour when there was a summons at the door. The servant who answered it saw, by the lamp in the hall, a figure wrapped in a cloak, whose collar upiting with a large slouch hat, concealed all of his features except his eyes and nose.

"Good-morning! Is Senorita Irona at home?"

"She is, sir."

"Please hand her this card, then"—and without waiting for an invitation, the visitor coolly stepped within and closed the door behind him. The servant, who now recognized him, moved away through the hall, while he proceeded to doff his overcoat,

overshoes and hat, and to close his umbrella in the frame. This done, he proceeded to the parlor, where he awaited the coming of Irona Seraville. In a few minutes a light step was heard dancing down the stairs, and, as the door opened, a vision of beauty seemed to float in upon the air. A slight, *petite* frame, black hair and eyes, of the true Spanish type, a nose slightly Roman, a face oval, with all the clearness of the Georgian, a small mouth, with thin, flexible lips and a well-poised head—these were the noticeable features in Irona Seraville's appearance, as, in a dress of the purest white, she tripped lightly into the room.

"Why, Ross, you have come? I had about given you up."

"As I leave to-morrow, I was kept later than I expected to be in making my preparations."

The speaker was a fair specimen of what we have heard him termed, a "young American." His countenance was not beautiful, but it was manly and prepossessing. He was rather tall, with a nervous temperament and a face stamped with the ruddy hue of health. He arose as he spoke, and taking the hand of Irona, seated her, and placed himself beside her.

"Well, I suppose you come to bid me that farewell we have been thinking about so long. You are to be gone *two whole months*! Ah, me! how shall I survive it?"

Her black eyes sparkled mischievously as she gave a deep-drawn sigh and attempted a rueful look at the same moment. The "young American" replied with a pleasant smile:

"You can spend the months, my fair one, in computing the minutes and seconds that will elapse before you shall behold me again."

"Yes, no doubt I shall, and in sighing away my life at your absence."

Her clear, silvery laugh rung out at this thought, and Welland, catching the contagion, was compelled to join her.

"Well, well," said she, with a more serious air, "we may be jesting upon what is a serious matter, after all. I am sure, if I were a man, that nothing could tempt me to make such a journey. The Texans and Mexicans are constantly at war with each other."

"I know; but recollect that we are friendly to the Texans and they to us, while the cowardly Mexicans never get as far north as we go. So you need have no apprehensions upon that score."

"But there are the Comanches, and Lipans, and other Indians, who, if anything, are worse than the Mexicans."

"That is true, Irona; but, surely, you cannot expect there can be such a journey as we attempt without *some* danger. How could we have the adventure we so ardently long for were it otherwise? If I were certain that we were to do nothing but merely to ride there and back again, I am sure I should not go with the party."

"I have no doubt but that you will meet with all the *adventure* you wish, and perhaps considerably more."

"We are well mounted and fully armed, and Colonel Ovaton is an old hand at such matters, while his two companions are equally skillful."

"Colonel Ovaton may be good enough, but I *don't* like him," said Irona, with emphasis.

"Why, little one, have you and he had a falling out?"

"I never spoke to him, and never wish to. He has been here several times."

"What does your father think of him?"

"I have never heard him say a word regarding him. Father has seemed troubled about something for a month or two."

"I am sorry to hear it, Irona; I trust that neither you nor I have been the cause of it."

"Just there you are wrong, for I am sure we two are the cause of his anxiety."

"We two! Why, what do you mean?"

"Can't you guess?" asked Irona, looking up in his face with a meaning expression. A suspicion flashed across Welland's mind—a suspicion of the truth, he felt it was, as he looked down into the dark eyes of the being beside him.

"Is it on account of my visits? Is he sorry of the relation that exists between us?"

"It is true, Ross."

"I never suspected this before, Irona. Why did you not acquaint me with it?"

"I never knew it before to-day. I cannot help thinking that that Colonel Ovaton has had something to do with it!"

"When was he here last?"

"To-night; I heard his voice as he came in."

"Why do you think Colonel Ovaton has influenced your father?"

"I have no reason to give except a suspicion, if that may be called a reason."

"I presume your father had some business to arrange with him. He is quite a naturalist, I understand, and he may have made some arrangement with him to procure some specimens for him."

"Very probably such is the case, Ross. I do not wish to give you an unjust suspicion. Remember, my *feelings* only are the cause of my thinking thus; and I can say, too, that my feelings hardly ever deceive me."

"That is," laughed Welland, "while you wish me to consider your suspicions of Colonel Ovaton without foundation, still you desire me to understand that they are true. Is that it?"

"It must be, I suppose."

"You spoke of your father's dislike to me, Irona. What cause has he for it?"

"None that I know of."

"To-day, for the first time you became aware of it. I presume he gave you his reasons."

"I have told you, Ross, that he has no *reasons*—they are *prejudices*. In the first place, you know he has an inveterate dislike, or coldness I might say, toward *all* Americans."

"No; I never knew that, before."

"Such has been the case with him, ever since I can remember."

"Why does he dislike them? Have they ever harmed him? Why does he remain in their country? Why does he not return to Spain?"

"Ross," said Irona, sternly, "you are speaking of my father."

"Forgive me, Irona; I did not think. I ask your pardon. Do not let me interrupt you again."

"To-day, when seated at the table with him, he said that the more he saw of American people the more he disliked them, and he really had serious thoughts of going back to Spain. I thought nothing of this—as I had often heard him make such remarks. But when he said, 'Rather than see my Irona married to an *American*, I would compel her to enter a convent'—when he said that, I say I understood what he meant. I felt as though I should drop to the floor. I could feel the blood rush to my face and I knew he noticed it. A few minutes later, as if he wished to *kill* me, he asked me when I had last seen that *American fellow*."

"What did you answer?"

"I told him the truth, of course."

"Does he know that I am here this evening?"

"I suppose so; why do you ask?"

"It seems strange that he did not make his appearance to protect you from 'that American fellow.'"

"Ross, remember he is my father, and it is his daughter to whom you speak. I love him with my whole heart, for he is the best of fathers to me. I know he has strong pride and prejudice, but I cannot bear to hear others speak of them."

Ross Welland was just now that unenviable person, a suspicious lover. While he had every reason to believe that his own passion for the fair girl beside him was returned, still the unexpected intelligence that her parent entertained a strong dislike for him,

nettled him greatly. The manner, too, in which Irona spoke of it—as though it were a matter of course—vexed him still more. These combined had worked him to a mood in which he might be expected to say something ungallant, and to do something excessively foolish.

"Let me assure you, then," said he, arising to go, "that Don Alfredo Seraville need have no further fears regarding his Irona. 'That American fellow' will henceforth cease to trouble his house."

"Ross, what does this mean? Have I given you cause for it?" demanded Irona, rising also, her dark eyes flashing with indignation.

"I would advise him to send his daughter to a convent, or give her to some old, withered up, but *noble* Spaniard," repeated Welland, gradually stepping toward the door as he spoke.

Irona stood like an indignant queen, not stirring an inch, but gazing upon him with a look of mingled pain and scorn.

"Do you know what you are saying?" she asked, in a low tone.

"I assure you I have ordinary comprehension left. Good-evening!"

The irate lover hurriedly donned his hat and overcoat, jerked open the door, and the next minute was striding down the street, the storm of vexation and jealousy in his breast rivaling that of the elements around him.

CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS CHARACTER.

It was not until the succeeding morning that Ross Welland entertained a suspicion that he had wrongly treated Irona Seraville. He may be said to have slept off his fit of jealousy, for he now viewed his conduct in its true light—as that which demanded the most ample apologies upon his part. But he had too much pride to visit a house where he knew he was viewed as an intruder, and he felt again provoked when he saw he had done so more than once—unconsciously to himself, it is true, but it was none the less humiliating, for that. Then he determined to address a note to Irona, but when prepared to do so, he reflected that in all probability it would never reach her. The thought that it would be compelled to pass the scrutiny of her father, was not to be tolerated an instant. No; he felt that he and she must part with this misunderstanding between them. When he returned, he trusted that it would all be adjusted again.

The sun had barely risen, when a boat cast loose from the wharf at New Orleans, and steamed rapidly down the Mississippi toward the Gulf of Mexico. It was a moderately-sized affair, made for coasting along the Gulf. Reaching the waters of this, it swerved to the right, and maintaining a safe distance from the land, bore off toward the Texan coast. Upon this boat, among a few other passengers, was Colonel Ovaton and his *compagnons du voyage*. Two of them—himself and Ross Welland—are already known to the reader. As the remaining two will necessarily act a part in our history, we will give them a passing notice as they are steaming across the Gulf.

Pierre Chouveau was what might aptly be termed the *square and silent man*. He was a large, bony Frenchman—one who often from morning until night never spoke a syllable. The most direct question generally failed to receive the slightest acknowledgment, and of those who knew him, none save Colonel Ovaton attempted to converse with him. The base of his jaw being as low as his chin, and the short hair over his forehead passing straight across it, his face in reality was *square*. The nose, with its large but even bridge, was a parallelogram. The mouth had the appearance of a line of ink drawn by rule; it was never open except when eating, upon which occasion its upward and downward motion was as regular as machinery. When he spoke, a small orifice at one corner, as though made by his pipe-stem, could be seen, from which his words

seemed to drop. A line from the shoulder to the neck would have been perfectly horizontal. His legs having the appearance of being several inches apart at their insertion, made his width at the shoulders, waist, hips, knees and feet precisely the same. The latter were not tapering, and in fact every portion of his body seemed constructed with the one idea of making him *square*. His motions were such as a beast of burden would make. All he needed was a directing power. For this reason he was a most useful man to Colonel Ovaton. He was a plodding, persevering fellow, who knew no right or wrong save his master's will. He was about fifty years of age, but like the latter, not a single silver hair glittered on his poll.

Jacques Choutier was ten years younger than Pierre. He was of mongrel blood, possessing a few virtues and many vices, though from his peculiar secretive habits, the latter were rarely known except to his intimate acquaintances. He was passionate and vindictive when his anger was roused, but on ordinary occasions he was good-natured and quite communicative. Quite a friendship had sprung up between himself and Welland. The latter at first was inclined toward him, for the reason that he was the only one in their company who would permit such an inclination. Colonel Ovaton, when embarked upon an expedition like this, was generally reserved, although he was now and then in a mood which led him to unbend his dignity. Jacques had a good fund of stories and information, and many an hour was whiled pleasantly away by Welland in listening to the recital of his numerous adventures.

The passage across the Gulf was a pleasant one, and was not varied by any incident worth mentioning. In due time the steamer arrived at Matagorda, at the head of the bay of the same name, where our adventurers spent their first night in Texas. The New Orleans merchants, under whose auspices this expedition was undertaken, had made arrangements to transport the men as far toward their destination as it could be done by water. Accordingly, upon their arrival, they found a small stern-wheeled steamer awaiting them for this purpose. In the morning, with their horses and effects, they embarked, and the voyage up the Rio Colorado commenced.

It did not escape the notice of Welland that, besides the members of their own company, there was another person upon the steamer—one who, from all appearances, had in view a journey similar to their own. He was accompanied by a magnificent black horse, was well armed, and had the *tout ensemble* of a man of the plains.

Despite the air of interest which attached to this man, there was an unaccountable feeling of repulsiveness which Welland felt toward him. He spent many an hour in the vain effort to ascertain what particular quality or point about the stranger was so distasteful to him. The man was reserved and thoughtful, yet there was nothing in his countenance which Welland could see, that bespoke the villain. And yet this unaccountable dislike not only remained but so increased that Welland felt if the stranger really intended to accompany them, he should be compelled to turn back. He made inquiries of Colonel Ovaton and Jacques, but both knew, or professed to know, nothing of him.

In the afternoon of the second day up the Rio Colorado, Welland was passing backward and forward upon the small deck of the steamer, his hands behind him and his head bent, in deep thought. He was reflecting, for the hundredth time, upon his last interview with Irona Seraville, partly excusing yet lamenting his own rashness. The thought that he had parted from her in anger—that a thousand things might arise to prevent a reconciliation—afforded him bitter food for reflection.

Indulging in these bitter meditations, Welland suddenly looked up, and started as he saw the stranger standing a few feet from him, gazing at him with a fixed and piercing look. He turned his

eyes away the instant he encountered those of Welland, but the latter, certain that he had been subjected to this scrutiny for a long time, determined to solve the mystery at once. Without pausing a moment, he walked directly up to him, and laying his hand upon his shoulder, asked:

"What is your name?"

"Que?" asked the stranger, with a wondering stare.

"Do you not speak English?" asked Welland.

He shook his head, as though he misunderstood the question.

"Fudge, then, I say! I haven't learned enough of your beautiful language yet to hold a conversation in it."

So, without attempting it, Welland turned and left the deck.

That night a bright moon arose in the early part of the evening. The pilot having ascended above this point in the river on a previous occasion, with the same boat, and being well acquainted with the stream, kept her under way during the entire night. Welland was standing at the bow of the boat, gazing at the dark outlines of the shore as they steamed up the river. Raising his eyes, he saw the stranger engaged in the same manner—not looking at him but at the shore. The moon shone full in his face, and he was gazing upon the banks with an intensity of interest that made him insensible to what was passing around him.

It was with a feeling akin to horror that, at this instant, the conviction flashed upon Welland that this man was to play an important part in his own destiny. He endeavored to dismiss the thought as a whim which had suddenly possessed him; but the more he reflected, the more fixed became that belief. For nearly an hour did he watch, hardly once removing his eyes from him. The stranger still scanned the shore with deep interest, and now and then moved his lips as though muttering to himself. To Welland's utter amazement, he distinctly heard the words, in good English:

"We hain't passed the point, I'm sure, and it must be hyerabouts."

His first impulse was to step forward and accuse the fellow of the deception which he had practiced; but, upon second thought, he concluded to keep his knowledge to himself. Now and then Welland could see the lips part, and hear him muttering, but caught no words. All at once the stranger raised his hand to his forehead, and, shading his eyes, leaned over the railing of the boat, and gazed toward the shore, as if he would penetrate through every obstacle with his piercing gaze. A few minutes seemed to satisfy him, when he hurriedly left his place, and shortly after, the boat stopped. In conversation with the pilot, Welland had been told that the man who troubled him so much was to leave the boat during the night; therefore he understood the cause of the stoppage.

A small boat was lowered, into which the stranger stepped, while Welland, by request, accompanied one of the men to assist in rowing him to the shore. He sat in the stern, holding the bridle of his horse, who swam behind, and in this manner the three rapidly approached the land. On the shore the stranger instantly mounted his horse, and, without a syllable, cantered off in the darkness. Welland and his companion paused by common consent until the retreating footsteps died away in the distance, when they rowed back to the steamer.

"We are now rid of you," muttered Welland, "and I fervently trust I shall never meet you again."

But he was to be disappointed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FIRST ENCAMPMENT AND THE FIRST ALARM.

THE point at which the stranger left the steamer was a few miles above the mouth of the Llano branch which puts into the Rio Colorado from the

west. Above, the navigation was exceedingly difficult.

The boat moved slowly during the night, and in the morning the captain informed Colonel Ovaton that he should put back by noon at the latest. The country on both banks of the stream was now the rolling prairie, which stretched away to the north and south as far as the eye could reach. The air was dry and bracing, and Jacques informed Welland that they were approaching one of the healthiest regions on the globe. At noon the boat ran aground, and our adventurers effected their debarkation, the river being so shallow that they easily rode ashore on their horses. As they reached land, the little steamer succeeded in backing off the bar, and, after interchange of farewells, the adventurers saw it put about and steam down the river.

The men had landed upon the northeastern shore of the Colorado, it being their intention to ascend the right bank of that river. As they are now fairly embarked upon their journey, we will give, in a few words, the manner in which they conducted it. The four, as we have before stated, were well mounted and well armed, each possessing a fine rifle, a brace of pistols, a bowie-knife, and an abundance of ammunition. The pack-horses carried their baggage, cooking utensils, and the articles needed upon such an expedition as theirs. Colonel Ovaton was an uneducated man, and his employers depended for their information upon the verbal report which he was to make on his return.

In journeying, this man generally rode ahead, sweeping the horizon continually for Comanche, Lipan, or wild animals. Jacques or Welland rode next, and Choujeau, the silent man, brought up the rear with the two pack-horses. Sometimes Colonel Ovaton fell behind, and it devolved upon Jacques and Welland to take the lead.

Journeying thus on the afternoon succeeding their debarkation, they came in sight of the Colorado Hills stretching away to the Llano Estacado, in a direction parallel with the river.

At nightfall, a small stream near its base was reached, where Colonel Ovaton concluded to encamp for the night. The grass was luxuriant and succulent, and the air sufficiently cool to make the warmth of a fire enjoyable. This was started in the bed of the brook, so that it could be seen but a short distance away.

"The Comanche sometimes comes as far east as this," remarked Jacques to Welland, "but it's altogether unlikely that there are any within two hundred miles of us."

"Unlikely, but by no means impossible, I presume, friend Jacques."

"Exactly, though nigh enough, impossible to make me feel safe."

"I am satisfied that Colonel Ovaton would permit nothing which could endanger the safety of the party, and you must not understand me as doubting the propriety of kindling this fire. It will not be fully night for an hour or two, and I propose that we take a ramble among the mountains. Have you any objection, Colonel Ovaton?" asked Welland, turning toward the latter.

"It's a poor time to hunt, late as this in the day, and 'tain't likely we'd see nothing of you ag'in till morning. There's plenty time to-morrow," replied Ovaton, shaking his head.

Welland said no more, as he felt it was hardly proper to dispute with their leader on so small a point as this; but he could not help thinking that he was more arbitrary than he had right to be, and as he had come upon this expedition for his own personal benefit, he resolved that he would be his own master—going whither and when he pleased without questioning any one.

Pierre was the cook of the party, and soon had toasted a good-sized piece of meat, from a quantity which they had brought with them. This, washed down by several draughts from the sparkling stream beside them, formed their evening repast, and it was

devoured with a zest by each. When finished, the four gathered around the fire, their blankets wrapped around their forms, and, producing their pipes, prepared for the evening's pleasure.

"Who stands guard to-night?" asked Jacques, of Ovaton.

"Him," he replied, nodding toward Welland.

"This is the best time for you," remarked Jacques.

"You see, 'twould hardly do to put you on duty when we were in among the Comanches, Apaches, or Lipans. You don't understand their devilments yet, and they would be sure to come some of them over you."

"I am perfectly willing, of course. I expect to share the duties as well as the pleasures of this expedition, and wish to take my turn with each of you."

Colonel Ovaton grunted, as if to intimate that his wish would be amply gratified in the future.

The hour being now quite late, the fire was replenished, and all save Welland, with their blankets wrapped about them, laid down with their feet toward it. Before they had done so, he asked of Colonel Ovaton his instructions for the night.

"Why, keep your peepers peeled; don't let a bird chirp without knowing where it's perched, and blaze away at anything you see moving."

"Shall I not awaken you?"

"Carrai! We'll wake, you may be sure. If you see a dozen red-skins, fire into 'em, or if it's nothing but a wild horse; but, you'll see little, I guess."

With these instructions, Welland commenced his watch for the night.

No moon or stars were visible. A bank of clouds, which lay in the horizon at sunset, had gradually overspread the heavens. These were not of a character to threaten storm, and objects were faintly visible at fifteen or twenty yards distance. The horses were picketed in the bed of the stream, and within twenty yards of the sleepers, their lariats allowing them to cross and recross the brook at will.

Welland felt there was little danger of his falling asleep, yet, to guard against such a misfortune, he placed his rifle over his shoulder and commenced walking slowly backward and forward, passing in his walk from the animals to a point a short distance from the fire. This afforded him a view of the prairie on both sides, and probably was the best course that he could have adopted.

He commenced his duties of the night with the firm resolve to obey Colonel Ovaton. He meant to keep an unremitting watch until daylight, and suffer nothing at all to occur which his vigilance could prevent.

Several times he walked up and down the stream, and then paused and listened; but he saw nothing unusual, and only heard the munching of the two pack-horses—the other having laid down for the night—and the occasional sighing of the wind through the mountains above him. Being somewhat fatigued, he seated himself for a moment near the animals, and the instant he did so, heard distinctly a footfall upon the prairie! It was like the clomp of a horse's hoof, and so plain that there could be no mistake about it. His first thought was that one of their own animals had broken hisariat, but a glance sufficed to show him his mistake. He next believed it to be nothing more than some wild beast, that had been attracted by the smell of their cooking meat, and remembering the injunction of Colonel Ovaton, that if a bird chirped to ascertain its perch, he listened for a second evidence of its proximity. In a few moments a sound was heard in another direction, as if made by the hoof of some animal striking a stone. Welland arose and walked toward the spot, with the intention of approaching nigh enough to ascertain the cause. He had gone but a few steps, when it occurred to him that he was performing an act which endangered not only his personal safety but that of the entire company.

He instantly turned on his heel and approached

the fire, which was now so low that the forms of the sleepers were barely visible. As he did so, the footfall was repeated, and looking around, he caught the shadowy outlines of a mounted horseman! Before he could bring his rifle to his shoulder, it had vanished. To say that Welland was now alarmed would be but the simple truth. This appearance of danger was so unexpected—so entirely unlooked for, that he was taken aback for a few moments. He determined, however, to challenge it when it next appeared, and to fire if the stranger refused to answer.

For fully half an hour did he exert himself to obtain the wished-for sight of the man, and again and again was he disappointed. Now he would hear the tramp of the horse, and when he looked in that direction, the animal whisked from view like some phantom. He heard it descend the hollow of the brook and cross the stream several times, so that it was evident the horseman was circling around him, but without approaching any closer, however.

Suddenly he distinguished the head of the horse looming up in the darkness, and saw him approach until he stood but fifty feet away. As the animal faced him, his head and that of his rider were distinctly outlined.

"Who goes there?" asked Welland.

He waited fully a minute, but received no reply.

"Who goes there, I say?" he repeated, in a tone louder than before.

But the horse and rider remained as motionless as death.

"Once again, and for the last time, I challenge you," said Welland, bringing his rifle to his shoulder, "and give you two seconds to answer in."

Two, and ten seconds elapsed without bringing any reply, and Welland took as deliberate an aim as the darkness would permit. While his finger was pressing the trigger, the horse became so indistinct that, fearful of losing his aim, he raised his head to assure himself that his rifle was really pointed toward them. To his amazement, both had disappeared!

"Be he man or demon!" he exclaimed, "I will not challenge him again before I fire."

He regretted his leniency, and determined to atone for it as far as in his power. He approached somewhat closer to the fire, being careful, however, to keep his own form from being seen. About an hour later, while looking carefully around him, his eyes rested upon the horse and his rider, still nearer than before—so near, in fact, that the contour of the man's face was visible. It was indeed the man that he believed it to be!

"Now, my fine fellow," thought Welland, "I'll try a different method of challenging you."

He took a quick aim and fired. The report of the rifle rung out with stunning clearness upon the still night air, and was instantly followed by that of another, the bullet of which whizzed within an inch of Welland's forehead, and buried itself in the sleeping form of Jacques. Instantly Colonel Ovaton and Pierre were on their feet and beside Welland, who, in a few hurried words, related the cause of his firing. The two former separated and made a circuit upon the prairie, but returned without having obtained a view of the horseman. Satisfied that he would not appear again, Colonel Ovaton turned his attention toward Jacques, who was suffering greatly from his wound.

CHAPTER V.

IN THE MOUNTAINS—THE FLIGHT.

THE wound of Jacques, although a bad one, was not necessarily dangerous. He had been lying with his feet toward Welland, and the bullet, striking just above his knee, plowed its way nearly to his hip, where it passed out, making an ugly flesh rip. He was unable to rise or use his leg. The most that could be done was to watch beside him until morning. Welland willingly performed this duty while

Colonel Ovaton and Pierre acted as sentinels. Nothing more, however, was seen of the horseman.

In the morning a consultation was held.

"How soon will you be able to ride your horse?" asked Ovaton of the wounded man.

"In two weeks, I s'pose," replied the latter, with a groan.

"Not before that, sure."

"You needn't wait for me, howsomever," added the sufferer; "if you're rather anxious to get ahead, take me and the horse up to the mountains, leave me a piece of fodder, and I'll shift for myself."

"I protest against such an inhuman proceeding," said Welland, excitedly. "It is nothing better than murder, and—"

"When we want *your* advice, sir, we'll ask it," interrupted Ovaton. "If Jacques wished to remain thus, and we could spare him, he should do so—"

"And I should stay with him," said Welland, indignantly.

"That would be as I thought best, young feller, and I'd advise you to keep a civil tongue in that head of yours. But that ain't the style in which I intend to do business. Jacques can't be *spired* no more than can any of us. So we'll move our camp up to the hills yender, where we'll stay till he's able to use his legs ag'in. How does that suit, Jacques?"

"It'll do."

"Being light now, I'll fix up his hurt summat better than 'twas done in the night, and, Pierre, you see that we've something to eat, as soon as such a thing can be done."

Pierre set about this duty, while Ovaton proceeded to unloose the rough bandage of the wound, and to re-dress it. This was done in the simplest manner, and at its conclusion the sufferer felt much relieved. All that was now needed was time for it to heal. Jacques had had worse wounds before, and felt no alarm for the result of this.

Colonel Ovaton was talking with him, and Welland was listening, when their attention was attracted by an exclamation from Pierre. So unusual an occurrence caused them to look instantly toward him, and Ovaton to ask:

"What is the matter now, Pierre?"

Several miles away they saw a horseman galloping at a rapid gait toward the Colorado Hills. At such a distance he resembled a pigmy, but as he stood out in relief against the clear sky beyond, he was so distinctly outlined that there could be no mistaking the person.

"He is the one who fired the shot," said Welland.

Colonel Ovaton, shading his eyes, gazed long and intently at him, and finally added:

"It's the very same chap that came from Matagorda with us."

"What I thought last night. What can he mean by following us in this manner?" asked Welland. Ovaton made no reply, and the three sat down to the morning meal. Jacques questioned Welland in regard to the horseman, and finally remarked:

"I've seen this chap before, I'm sure."

"Where?"

"I have been trying to think for the last half-hour. Colonel Ovaton, haven't you seen him yourself?"

"Not before he came on the boat at Matagorda."

"That's a downright lie," said Jacques, in a lower tone, to Welland. "I just now thought where it was we had set eyes on him, for Ovaton was with me at the time. It was in St. Louis, two years ago. Me and the colonel had been trapping up on the Platte. We made a trip up to Fort Laramie on our way back, and when we left there, that knave was there, mounted on the same black horse that he's on this minute. We struck a bee-line for St. Louis, and when we drove up to the 'Hunter's Home,' the very first one we laid eyes on was that identical chap. I remember how Colonel Ovaton axed him whether he was the Flying Dutchman 'cause we'd made up our minds that about the shortest time ever

made between Fort Laramie and St. Louis had been made by us.

"Did he talk English to you?"

"Talk English? I should think he did. We stayed there a week, and he was there when we left. He spent a pile in treating us and everybody else who happened to drop in, and he used to spin some long yarns that he said he'd *heard*—for he never once told anything that *he* went through."

"Did you learn anything of him?"

"Not a bit. I tried to pump him a dozen times, but it was no go. I didn't even l'arn his name."

"Did you see him again before the other day?"

"Yes; I met him last summer in Memphis. Colonel Ovaton happened to be with me that time, too. But, (would you believe it?) the knave pretended he didn't know it. He stuck to it he had never met us before, and when I kind of insinuated that he was lying tremendous big, he clinched it by saying that he'd never been in St. Louis."

"Could you not have been mistaken?"

"No, sir. If you notice, one of his eyes is gray and t'other is black, and he remembered us well enough. I offered to bring myself to his mind by making a free fight with him, but he didn't appear to care particular about it."

"Well, now, Jacques, who can he be, and what does he mean by following us in this manner?"

"You may scalp me if I can tell. I only ax the chance to square last night's account with him. He'll find out who I am, I'm thinking just now."

"I presume your wound was an accidental one upon his part. He undoubtedly meant it for me."

"All the same. He fired at our party, and he hit me. Can you see him yet?"

"No; he has reached the Hills and probably is ascending them. He is concealed by the bushes upon their sides."

"Wal, as we are going to them same Hills, I shouldn't wonder if we had the chance to make his acquaintance ag'in."

"Do you believe Colonel Ovaton remembers him?" asked Welland, in a whisper.

"He can't help it. I know he does."

"Do you believe Colonel Ovaton knows anything of the cause which has led him to follow us? Do you believe there is any connection between the two?"

Jacques looked up with a wondering expression, and replied:

"I never thought of that; it may be so."

"If such be the case—"

"Sh! they are ready to move," admonished Jacques.

The pack-horses were loaded and everything ready, with the exception of the wounded man, for a journey. Welland mounted his own horse, and assisted by Ovaton and Pierre, lifted Jacques up before him, where he held him as they rode forward. In this fashion they moved off toward the Hills. Two hours brought them to the base, and they began the toilsome ascent. One-third the way up they came to a large, valley-like depression, through which a small stream of cold and sparkling water flowed. Here Colonel Ovaton decided to establish their camp.

A sort of rude tent was erected upon the banks of the stream, where it was completely screened by the luxuriant trees and vegetation. The best of provender was all around them; there was, therefore, no anxiety on account of the horses. After the arrangements had been completed, Colonel Ovaton, accompanied by Pierre, spent several hours in wandering over the mountains to ascertain their precise situation and to see whether there was any prospect of receiving a visit from the Comanches. From this elevation they were afforded a magnificent view of the surrounding country. To the north and east stretched the billowy prairies, covered with all kinds of vegetation, and crossed and recrossed by streams and rivers. To the south and west the same prospect

met the eye; not a sign of a human being was visible.

No signs of game were seen, yet they were satisfied there was plenty in the mountains, which their rifles would ever be an unfailing reliance in obtaining. They finally descended to their camping-ground, reaching it near the hour of noon. A dark scowl passed over Colonel Ovation's face when he saw Welland and Jacques engaged in earnest conversation. He deigned no reply to the latter's questions, and more than once made an insulting remark to the former, who, though severely stung, possessed enough prudence to restrain his temper. Immediately after the meal, Colonel Ovation, refusing the company of any one, shouldered his rifle and took his departure.

It is not our purpose to dwell upon all the particulars of this encampment among the mountains, but to give only those which directly concern the progress of our story. A week gradually lengthened into two, and it was found that Jacques would not be fit to mount his horse until another had expired. Colonel Ovation, who seemed perfectly satisfied to remain any length of time, announced that they should not move away until their disabled companion was perfectly able to accompany them.

The greater part of the day was spent by Ovation in wandering alone over the mountains, and once or twice he had taken Pierre with him. Although a good shot, Welland could not help noticing that he never brought back any game; this duty devolving upon himself and Pierre. From this, he concluded their leader employed the time in some other manner than hunting. Welland himself occasionally spent an hour in an aimless ramble, and on two separate occasions did not return till after dusk. The last time Colonel Ovation cautioned him that it would be *dangerous* to repeat this experiment, as it was more than probable that enemies were abroad in the mountains.

Nothing had been seen or heard of the horseman by Welland, but he had not forgotten him by any means.

One pleasant afternoon he ascended the mountain and took a direction in which he had been accustomed to travel—that is, to the northward. He also went further than he intended, and when he seated himself upon a rock, found he was at the base of the mountain upon the opposite side. While looking listlessly about him, he was startled by hearing the stamp of a horse's foot. From the sound he knew the animal was somewhat near him, but was evidently concealed by the dense vegetation. Determined to ascertain his locality, he arose and cautiously made his way through the shrubbery and undergrowth, and had gone scarcely a dozen steps when he came upon the black horse of the hunter with whom he had exchanged shots upon the night of their first engagement! While wondering and speculating upon this, he heard the hum of voices near at hand, and after some more careful reconnoitering, discovered the hunter himself in conversation with Colonel Ovation. They were seated upon a fallen tree, and so earnestly engaged that both could have been pounced upon by a couple of Indians with a moral certainty of success.

Welland felt the circumstances would have justified him in playing the eavesdropper if it could have done him any good; but, overhearing a word or so, he found they were speaking in the Spanish—a language of which he had not enough knowledge to avail himself. Not knowing how soon their conference might end, he withdrew and made his way back to the encampment. On his way thither he had almost come to the conclusion to impart what he had learned to Jacques, but, singular as it may seem, the incidents of the last day or two had filled him with suspicion of this man, and he resolved to keep his own counsel.

That night Ross Welland almost resolved to leave his company and return to the East. A suspicion—in fact, an absolute certainty, that the disposition of

his own person was determined by Ovation, led to this, and he made a mental vow that he would not advance a step further north in his company. He could not well leave at the time he formed this conclusion, as Pierre was acting as sentinel. It could do no harm, he concluded, to remain a day longer, and in the mean time he would keep a closer watch upon those around him.

The next day passed as had many of the former ones. Colonel Ovation was absent most of the time, and, as good fortune would have it, Welland was assigned the duty of acting sentinel through the night. This convinced him that no suspicion was entertained of his intention, and assured him that coolness and self-confidence were all that was needed to insure success. Colonel Ovation was the first to fall asleep, and Pierre the next. Jacques, from sleeping so much through the day, was restless and wakeful; but, at a late hour, Welland concluded matters looked favorable enough to make the attempt. Stealing cautiously away from their rude tent, he passed out to where the horses were grazing. His own animal was there, and mounting him, he carefully descended the mountain, reached the open prairie, and struck off on a gallop to the southeast, in a direction parallel with the Hills. He determined to reach the Rio Colorado and follow it down to Matagorda, or some of the Eastern cities, where he would take the first opportunity to make his way back to New Orleans. He would explain his haste and apologize for his rudeness to Irona—and what then?

Ross Welland was suddenly awakened from these reflections by the mingled reports of rifles, faintly heard in the distance. As he paused and listened, he distinguished several sounds, as if they were the yell of Indians. They were directly ahead of him, and showed that a conflict was going on at that moment.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WHITE STEED OF THE PRAIRIE—AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

WELLAND knew that the combatants, whoever they might be, were probably a long distance away. Feeling little fear of coming up with them, at least for several hours, he determined to ride forward, in the direction from which the sounds came, as long as he deemed it expedient, when he could change his course to suit circumstances.

At night the moon arose, as if coming from the bed of the ocean, and, inspired as Welland was with the thought that every hour was drawing him nearer to his adored Irona, and increasing the distance between him and his enemies, he could not resist the influence of the scene around him. To the left, the dark, gloomy mass of the Colorado Hills stretched miles and miles away, while on the right, in the rear, and on the front, the rolling prairie, covered with its exuberant vegetation, encompassed him. He seemed a wanderer upon the limitless sea.

As the moon rose higher and higher, and the prairie became lightened up, a view of several miles in extent was afforded.

About a mile in advance, Welland distinguished a vast tract of the prairie which seemed entirely devoid of vegetation, having the appearance of newly-plowed earth. This phenomenon was soon explained by a deep, thundering roll and a sudden trembling of the earth as if shaken by an earthquake. It was an almost innumerable herd of buffaloes, who, scenting danger in the air, were plunging away over the prairie, which fairly vibrated beneath their tread. They took a direction at right angles to the one he was following, and he reined up until they had passed before him. He then resumed his journey, crossing a belt of prairie, which looked as if it had been desolated by a tornado.

It was still far from midnight, and, riding steadily forward, he gave way to his feelings, and indulged in a pleasant reverie. From this he was recalled by the sudden sheering of his horse, and a neigh of

alarm. At first he was at a loss to discover the cause of his fear; but in a few moments distinguished a *willow animal*, several hundred yards distant, which was keeping pace with his own. A feeling of superstitious alarm took possession of Welland at this unexpected apparition. It was not galloping, like his own beast, but pacing, and its hoofs rung out with startling clearness upon the prairie.

"The *Cavallo Blanco*, as I live!" exclaimed Welland. "That famed animal of which I have heard and read so many marvels."

It was indeed a beautiful white horse—the veritable one which has become so celebrated in history, and Welland now viewed him with the most fervent admiration. Once he laid his hand upon his rifle, as he reflected that it was in his power to bring down this king of the prairie, but he dismissed the thought as unworthy of a civilized being. No one could wish to slay or maim such a magnificent beast, although baffled many had been, in their efforts to capture him. The White Steed and that of Welland had exchanged a friendly neigh or two, and they now gradually verged toward each other until within less than a hundred yards. Welland endeavored to approach still closer, but the royal pacer would not permit it, and at this relative distance they careered the one on a swift gallop, and the other upon an easy, steady, racking-pace.

"Heaven! if I only had you under saddle and bridle!" exclaimed Welland, as he again surveyed the noble horse. "Next to my own Irona, you are the most beautiful creature that I have ever seen. No wealth could purchase such a treasure."

Welland's horse, which had never been left behind in a contest of speed, seemed vexed and uneasy at this strange animal maintaining his place beside him. He chafed under the bit, and would not be restrained by his rider. He was determined to display his own powers.

"Well, go ahead, my good horse," said his rider, loosening the rein; "you have never met your mate before, but you will find out you now have. I have an idea, however, that you can compel him to resort to his best to keep his distance. Go ahead!"

The horse headed toward the White Steed, and burst away at a tremendous gait. He gradually gained until he was within twenty feet, and Welland's heart leaped with exultation at the thought that the animal he bestrode was able to cope with this celebrated pacer, when the latter flung his head aloft, and with a whinny that sounded like the scream of a panther, shot ahead with such extraordinary velocity that for a moment Welland believed his own horse had dropped down to a walk, so rapidly was he left behind. But, as he looked down and saw that he was calling his utmost powers into play, he no longer wondered at the marvelous stories that were told of the White Steed.

The horse, now fully a quarter of a mile in advance, turned his side toward his pursuer, and prancing thus, maintained the same distance for several minutes. Under the bright moonlight, every grace and charm were as distinctly brought out as at noon-day, and when he coursed across the prairie with arrowy swiftness, a more singularly beautiful spectacle could not have been imagined. With a shrill neigh as if in scorn at this attempt to cope with him, he burst away again describing a complete circle around Welland, and approaching within a few yards of him with that dainty, delicate step which is seen when the trained horse is reined down to a walk by his master. Welland's horse, seemingly conscious that he was in the company of no ordinary animal, gave over his terrific efforts, and settled down into the same easy, swinging gallop as before, while his rider contented himself with watching the curvetings and gyrations of the White Steed.

Prancing, pacing thus, and taunting him, the latter continued his playful antics for over an hour, when, sending forth one of his piercing screams, he shot

off upon the prairie with incredible swiftness, soon disappeared, and was seen no more.

Welland judged it now to be midnight, and deemed it best that his horse should have several hours' rest. A half-mile ahead, a long, dark line stretched across the plain, blending at either end with the darkness. This he knew to be a belt of timber, fringing a small tributary of the Rio Colorado, and here he determined he should halt until morning. As he rode up and down the billowy swells of the prairie, he kept his eye fixed upon it, with the object of selecting some favorable spot for his purpose. It was within several hundred yards, when something twinkled like a firefly in the grove, and immediately disappeared. As he ascended the rise in the prairie, the glimmer was visible, and, halting a moment, he satisfied himself that he was within a short distance of some one's camp-fire.

He approached the timber in a circuitous direction and fastening his horse upon the outskirt, carefully picked his way through it. He discovered, in a few moments, that the fire was upon the opposite side of the stream; the latter, however, was very shallow, and he crossed it without difficulty. A few yards further, passed with a tread as silent as death, and he gained a full view of the fire. Instead of a party of hideous Indians upon the war-path, he saw two white men, evidently hunters or trappers, lazily smoking their pipes. Both were bronzed and shaggy-looking, and sat gazing into the fire before them with the most imperturbable gravity, and without speaking a word. Welland changed his position to gain a better view, and as he did so, discovered that there was a third party. This was a female, sitting with a shawl wrapped around her, leaning her head forward and covering her face with her hands. She was of a slight, delicate frame, with black, luxuriant hair, and Welland supposed her to be the young squaw of one of the hunters. She sat as motionless as a statue, and the three, equally moveless and silent, formed a singular and picturesque tableau.

At this instant a twig snapped beneath the foot of Welland, and the female looked up. The light of the camp-fires shone full upon her face, and Ross Welland saw before him—Irona Seraville!

CHAPTER VII.

THE HUNTERS AND THEIR ADVENTURE.

THERE was no mistaking her. The same oval face, the same massy black hair, the dark eyes, the features all were hers. Yes, Irona Seraville was before him. Unaccountable as was her appearance, Welland felt no doubts of her identity. She who, he was certain, was in a distant city, where he had left her several weeks before, was here, alone with two rude hunters upon the prairie of Texas.

Hardly ten seconds had elapsed since this astounding discovery, when Welland resolved to advance, make himself known to the hunters, and claim their companion. With this intention he stepped noiselessly from behind the tree, and by that movement saved his life. As he did so, the sharp crack of a rifle resounded through the grove, and the whistle of a bullet was within an inch of his eyes. The breaking of the twig beneath his foot had betrayed his proximity to the hunters, and ten seconds sufficed for them to ascertain his hiding-place. Ere he had recovered from his confusion created by this greeting, a dark, ball-like body bounded toward him, and leaping in the air came down like a panther upon him.

"Hold!" shouted Welland, struggling in the Herculean grasp, "I am a friend! Do not strike!"

Instead of having the hold upon him loosened, Welland was dragged to the fire, where his head was unceremoniously bent down and a view of his features taken.

"White or I'm a red-skin," exclaimed his captor. "What you doin' in these parts, say?"

Before replying, Welland glanced at Irona, and saw with gratification that she had not recognized

him. Keeping his back toward her and partly disguising his voice, he answered:

"I saw your camp fire for some distance, and was seeking to find out whether it belonged to friends or foes, when, it seems, you discovered me."

"Wal, we did, stranger, and rayther a dangerous diskiver it come nigh bein' to you, didn't it, eh?"

"More so than I care about undergoing again."

"What mought be the handle you uses in these parts, stranger?" asked the second hunter.

"Ross Welland, sir."

"If it ain't axing too much, what mought be the handle you uses *at hum*, eh?"

"Why, the same, of course."

"Wal wal! Come, now, that might do with some, but it don't go down with us. Howsumever, it's none of our business, and you needn't tell us if you don't choose. From the States, I s'pose?"

"Yes, sir."

"What mought have been the *inducement* for you to emigrate—house-burning, house-breaking, murder, or any of them gentlemanly amusements?" asked the first hunter, with a sly look.

"I don't unders'and you, sir," replied Welland, getting an inkling of their meaning the instant he had made his answer.

"Don't understand, eh? What give you the notion of *emigrat nq*?"

"I came to Texas of my own free will a few weeks since, with Colonel Ovaton."

"With who, di: you say?" quickly asked the hunter.

"Colonel Ovaton, and two of his friends."

"Colonel Ovaton, eh? And a pretty ruff'n he is, too. I ca'e'late if he had his dues, he'd be hung in every State, city and village between us and the Potomac. It don't speak well, Mr. Ross Welland, for you to tell such a story after bein' in Colonel Ovaton's company."

"I know nothing of Colonel Ovaton, except that he has been employed by several wealthy merchants to examine Northwestern Texas. For the novelty and adventure I undertook to accompany him."

"What you doin' in these parts then, eh?"

"I saw several things about him that I did not particularly like; so I left him in the early part of the evening."

"A lucky leave, I should say, though I don't know as the man had any fancy for you."

"I have given you my name, friends, and now I should be glad to hear yours."

"Ef I'm called Ned Nuggens, I won't get mad," replied the hunter, who had come so nigh shooting Welland.

"And yours, if you please?" he asked, turning toward the other.

"By the same token, I'm called John Smith."

"John Smith," laughed Welland; "it seems I have heard that name before."

"Mought be; I'm pretty generally known in these parts."

"Those are the names, I presume, that you use in *Texas*," said Welland, meaningly.

"That's why we give 'em."

"I won't ask you, as you did me, the inducement that led you to emigrate, for I cannot believe it was any crime."

"No, sir, it *wasn't*. John Smith is the only handle I ever used, and Ned Nuggens is the only one that Comanche over thar ever toted about. We didn't *emigrate*. We was both born down 'long the Texan coast, and we've seen some tall times in our day. It ain't many strangers we've come across, as are from the States, but what have been sorter *induced*, as you might say, to emigrate. That's why I axed you."

"I suppose you are hunters?"

"Exactly. Hain't you got a boss?"

"Certainly; he is picketed a short distance away. Why did you ask?"

"Only 'cause I wanted to know. Where are you bound to, just now?"

"I am on my way to New Orleans. I suppose you are on a hunting or trapping expedition?"

"Exactly; we're goin' up toward the upper part of the Colorado."

"The Comanches, I believe, frequent that part of the country?"

"Yes, but we're used to 'em; had many a brush with 'em, and jest to get our hand in we had a scrimmage to-night with a lot."

"You did? Then it was your guns I heard?"

"Shouldn't wonder, if 'twas about three or four hours ago. If you heerd ours you heerd thirs too, for they used 'em."

"What was the cause of the affray?" eagerly asked Welland.

"That piece of calico back thar," replied Nuggens, in a low tone.

"Ah! was she in their possession—a prisoner?" pursued Welland, unable to restrain his eagerness.

"That's what was the matter."

"Let me have the particulars, will you?"

"In the morning," replied Nuggens. "'S too late in the evening now."

Welland deemed it prudent not to press the hunter, as he knew enough of their class to understand that it could avail nothing. He arose and remarked:

"I will attend to my horse and then rejoin you."

As he passed out among the trees, he glanced at Irona. She was gazing intently at him, as though she suspected the truth, and he was tempted to return and make himself known to her; but on second thought, he deemed it best to wait until morning. He found his horse as he had left him, and, satisfying himself that he was secure until that time, he returned to the camp-fire. Here he saw that the arrangements for the night had been completed. More fagots had been heaped upon the blaze, a screen of brush was re-arranged so as to conceal the flame, while Irona had retired for the night. One of the hunters' huge blankets was spread upon the ground and formed her bed. Her own shawl was first wrapped around her, and then the other gathered up a roll at the head forming the pillow, so that, all things considered, her condition was as comfortable as it could be under the circumstances. "John Smith" resembled a monstrous turtle, hermetically sealed in his shell. Neither his head nor his feet—nothing but a roll of blanket, puffed up to an enormous size, revealed his dwelling-place. Nuggens was seated just beyond the circle of the fire, where he had settled himself to keep watch over his sleeping companions through the night. Hoping that he might be disposed to enter into conversation, Welland approached him:

"Do you apprehend a visit from the Comanches to-night?"

"Don't understand that big word you used. Speak English and I'll understand."

"Have you any fear of the Indians attacking you before morning?"

"Me and Smith don't *fear* the red-skins."

"That isn't exactly what I mean. Do you believe that they will attack you?"

"Why didn't you say so afore? No, don't think they will."

"Isn't there danger of your fire being seen from the prairie?"

"I reckons not."

"I saw it before I reached the timber, and it was that which directed me to it."

"How far off mought you have seen it?"

"It was at no great distance, but, I should think, further than you care about its being visible."

"Pein' *what*?" asked Nuggens, turning toward Welland with an expression of disgust.

"Bein' *visible*—being *seen*, if that's plainer."

"No, the fire can't be *visible* by any of the imps, 'less they run right into it, which they ain't noways likely to do. 'Cause why, we've kivered it up by the brush and stuff around hyer. We hadn't this here side screened as much as we ort to, and you happened to strike just the p'int where you could see it,"

"Friend Nuggens, I don't feel very drowsy this evening, and, if you have no objection to offer, should like to talk with you awhile, about that girl sleeping over there."

"I understand; you're *struck*, you are. Got it *strong*, sure. Ever seen her afore?"

"She is an old friend—and an old acquaintance."

"Not very old, I reckons, youngster, from her looks."

"I have been long acquainted with her."

"You have, eh? Why didn't you make yourself knowed to her?"

"I did intend to, but I thought it best to wait until to-morrow."

"Where'd you ever see her afore?"

"In New Orleans."

"Yas," said the hunter, nodding his head, as if talking with himself. "That's whar she said she come from."

"She told you, then, did she? Nuggens, can you not give me the particulars of your rescue of her, and of all you have learned regarding her?"

"You'll know it all in the mornin'. I'd tell you now, but I must keep watch till daylight, and it makes me sleepy to talk. I'll wake you up at daylight, before she or Smith are up, and give it to you, if that'll do."

Welland signified his satisfaction with this arrangement and laid down. He rolled his blanket more closely around him, and gave himself up to slumber.

But no slumber was to visit him that night. Scarcely had he thus resigned himself, when he heard Nuggens make a movement which awakened his curiosity. Throwing the blanket from his face, and looking where he was last seated, he saw him stealthily glide out and disappear in the darkness. At first he was disposed to rise and follow him; but he reflected at once that such a proceeding would bring down the ire of the hunter. Accordingly he laid down and listened. The instant his ear touched the ground, he heard several pulse-like thumps as if a horse were approaching. They were heard distinctly for the space of a minute, when they ceased, as though the rider had suddenly reined up his animal.

Now followed a moment of intense stillness, during which Welland heard nothing but the beat of his own heart, and the regular breathing of the unconscious Smith. He lay with his ear to the ground, his whole being absorbed in the one object of listening. All at once the earth seemed to tremble, and the peculiar *thump-ty-thump* of a horse in full gallop was heard, followed by a loud splashing through the water; but to Welland's astonishment there was no discharge of fire-arms. He arose, and passing beyond the light of the smoldering fire, awaited the approach of the hunter. In a moment he loomed up in the gloom, and took his seat with as much composure as though nothing had occurred to disturb him. It was impossible for Welland to restrain his impatience, and cringing noiselessly to his side, he asked:

"What was the meaning of all that noise?"

The hunter turned toward him as if surprised at the question, and replied:

"What business have you to be pokin' round this time of night? Go to sleep."

"I am certain that it would occasion you no harm to answer a civil question."

"Ugh! go to sleep; maybe you'll find out in the mornin'."

No other course was left for him, and accordingly he laid down again. The night passed away without further incident. At the first appearance of daylight both Welland and Smith were astir, and Nuggens related to them both the particulars of his nocturnal adventure.

He had detected the step of a highly-trained horse crossing the brook, and, as he believed, approaching their camp. He instantly moved off to discover what visitor he was likely to have; but the rider's suspicions were evidently awakened at the same moment with his own. The sounds suddenly ceased,

and for a moment the hunter was at fault. Searching carefully, however, he saw the head and shoulders of a man, and the head of a horse, the latter standing in the center of the stream. A doubt that the stranger was an enemy restrained Nuggens from firing. He moved nearer to him, when the horse wheeled, and dashed through the timber to the open prairie. The hunter followed him, and in the bright moonlight distinguished him for a long distance, as he ascended the regular elevation and his body came out in bold relief against the sky beyond. He saw him halt several hundred yards away, when two other horsemen rode up and joined him.

This latter circumstance awakened the suspicions of Welland, and he inquired more particularly in regard to the one who entered the timber. The hunter could give nothing more except that he wore a Mexican *sombrero—can with a very broad rim*. The others were at too great a distance upon the prairie for him to notice the peculiarities of their dress. But Welland had learned enough. He had no doubt that the first-mentioned horseman was the *stranger*—the one who had visited him before and who seemed to haunt him now. The other two were Pierre and Colonel Ovation.

Their knowledge of Irona was now what Welland wished from the hunters. This was unsatisfactory in regard to the *great* question with him, and was given in a few words. The day before, while riding along the Colorado, they discovered three Indians, in the distance. They were Comanches, and it was evident that they were impeded with a captive. Their implacable hatred of these red-men led the hunters to the resolve to capture their prisoner and give them a taste of their mettle at the same time. Prudence led them to defer their assault until evening. The hunters kept a good distance away saw where they were likely to encamp, and as soon as it was dark, commenced their approach. They reached their camp before the moon arose, and, contrary to their expectation, found the Indians entirely unprepared for any attack. One was engaged in preparing their supper, while the other two were loling upon the grass, in idle enjoyment. Irona, the captive, sat a few feet away, and was unbound. This, considering the fancied security of the Indians, was not strange. While Smith crept forward toward their horses, which were picketed a short distance away, Nuggens "drew bead" upon one of the Comanches and held his aim until the proper moment should arrive for him to fire. Smith now made some confusion among the animals, in the hope of drawing their attention to that point. The stratagem turned out just as they wished. One of the Indians arose and started toward them to ascertain the trouble. So soon as he came nigh enough, Smith fired, and at the same moment Nuggens did the same, and rushed forward to finish the remaining one.

The latter, however, was too quick for him. He instantly broke for cover, and before they could reload, he was beyond their reach. One of those slain, however, proved to be a *white man* in disguise. They found Irona unharmed, and grateful enough that she was once more in the hands of the white people. She stated that she had been taken prisoner by a band of thirty Comanches a week previous, and that two days afterward had been intrusted to the charge of these three. What their destination or intentions were she did not know, but believed they meant to ret-ain her for the ransom which would be offered. Beyond these mere facts, the hunters knew nothing. Where Irona was when captured, and how the opportunity came to be given, she refused to tell. She offered them a handsome sum to return with her to some point in Eastern Texas where she could make her way back to New Orleans. The hunters had consented to do it, but upon Welland's offering himself as her escort, they willingly yielded. It was agreed that he should start east with her in a few hours, while they would continue their journey to the northwest.

While Smith was preparing the morning meal, Irona awoke and looked about her. She started with wonder at seeing Welland, who, approaching her, said:

"You are undoubtedly surprised, dear Irona, at meeting me here, but you cannot have one jot of the amazement I feel at finding *you*—hundreds of miles from the home where I left you a few weeks since, and where I expected to find you upon my return. I trust nothing has befallen your father?"

She shook her head with sadness. "No, I believe he is at home, indulging the belief that his daughter is safe in *Austin*."

"In Austin! Why does he expect you are there?"

"Because he sent me there. Ross, do not question me now; I will explain all to you some other time, provided you are in a mood to receive it."

Welland understood the allusion and colored to his temples.

"I beg your forgiveness, Irona, for my conduct upon that night. I was blinded by jealousy, and acted rudely, I admit. Had it been possible, I should have deferred the expedition until I could have explained it to you."

"I willingly forgive you, and now let us say no more about it. Do you accompany us on our return?"

"I go with you, but Smith and Nuggens proceed in the opposite direction. They are very anxious to reach some point near Mexico, and think we can make our way back to the settlements without difficulty."

"I trust so, for I am anxious enough to reach them."

"I see they have our breakfast ready. We will partake of something and be on our way as soon as possible."

The hunters had prepared a substantial meal, of which all partook heartily. When they had finished, Smith did up a portion of buffalo-hump for Welland to take with him. Welland now noticed, with some misgivings, what had already been noticed by others, viz.: that there was but one horse for him and Irona. His animal, however, was a powerful one, fully capable of bearing both, and the matter could not be mended, so he said nothing about it.

Farewells were exchanged with the hunters. Irona thanked them again and again, and extorted a promise from each to visit New Orleans upon the first opportunity, she intending—although she did not mention the latter fact—to give them something more substantial than mere thanks.

Our hero and heroine were mounted, the latter seated in front of him, when Smith approached and signified that he had something for Welland's private ear. He leaned over and the hunter whispered:

"It ain't Comanches you've to fear; it's *white men*. You know who I mean. Keep a sharp lookout, for I'm sartain they're on your trail. If they get you into tight quarters, maybe me and Nuggens will turn up for you."

Welland thanked him, promised to be on the alert, and he and Irona again bade them farewell. A minute later, their horse's head was turned toward the east, and their eventful homeward journey was begun.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HISTORY OF THE STRANGE HORSEMAN.

THE direction which Welland took was nearly due southeast, parallel with, and a short distance from the Rio Colorado, it being his intention to follow this stream, both as a guide, and as affording the most direct route to the coast. The additional weight of Irona seemed scarcely felt by his noble horse.

The parting words of Smith were ever present to Welland. They had changed his suspicion of the ill-feeling of Colonel Ovaton and the strange horseman toward him, into the certainty that both were his mortal enemies. Why they felt thus, he had not

the remotest suspicion. Colonel Ovaton, he believed was friendly, or, at least, indifferent toward him when the journey commenced and his change of feeling was to be ascribed to the influence of the stranger. This man, then, concluded Welland, was the prime cause of all the mischief, and he it was who was so doggedly pursuing him.

"It is the opinion of a certain gentleman, that, if the chance is offered, his racing days will come to a sudden stop," muttered Welland, wholly absorbed in revolving the question in his excited mind.

"Whom do you mean?" asked Irona.

"I am unable to tell you, except that he is an enemy."

"Where is he?"

"Neither can I answer that, except that he is behind us. He is a dark, swarthy-looking man, who is distinguished by a large Mexican *sombrero*."

"What?" demanded Irona, turning around and looking him in the face with the most painful eagerness.

"He is a black-looking man, who is distinguished by the large-brimmed hat he wears."

"Is he a cross-eyed person?"

"I believe he is, one eye being gray and the other black. It seems you know something of him?"

"I do, indeed. He, I believe, was the cause of my being taken prisoner by the Comanche Indians."

It was Welland's turn now to be astonished.

"He the cause of your being captured by them? How can that be?"

"It was he who incited them to do it, and I am sure it was for him that they did the deed."

"Please explain yourself, Irona. Have you known this man for any length of time?"

"For several years; I knew him in Europe."

"Irona, you now can have no objection to relate all that has transpired since I left your home."

"No; I will tell all that I know of these strange events."

"First, in regard to this stranger, as you call him. His name, I believe, is Juarez Vasquelon. Three years ago, when I was at school in Madrid, I met him on the street. I remember how narrowly he watched me, and how often I found him following when I was alone, or in the company of my schoolmates. Not a word passed between us; but so sure as I turned to look behind me, I was sure to see those dreadful eyes fixed upon me. This continued several months, during which I grew to fear him as I would have feared a wild animal.

"But, one day I missed him, and the next day saw nothing of him, and when a week had passed without his appearing, I began to hope that he had left the city. So it proved, I never saw him in Madrid again.

"A year ago I returned home to my dear father to New Orleans. During my absence I had grown to be quite a woman, so that at first he hardly recognized me. I had been at home a month or so, when, one day, father told me a gentleman, and a much respected friend, was to spend the afternoon with him. He said he desired to present him to me, and from several hints which he dropped I was convinced that he wanted me to be prepared to look upon him in the light of a suitor.

"In the afternoon the man came, was presented, and he was Juarez Vasquelon! It being two years since I had seen him, I had long ceased to think of him, and, indeed, had nearly forgotten how he appeared. My agitation was so great that father became alarmed, and led me out of the room. He had no suspicion of the true cause, and upon my recovering, urged me to return to the drawing-room. I could not refuse, and did so. Vasquelon remained during the afternoon, and called regularly for a week or two. My dislike and fear of him increased so much, that, at last, I told father the whole truth, relating how I had seen him in Madrid, and saying that I looked upon him with loathing and horror. He seemed much surprised, and said that, for the present, I should receive no more visits from him, if

they were so painful. He remarked that Vasquelon was a Spaniard of honorable stock, and he had long cherished the idea of having him for his son-in-law. He promised solemnly, however, that as I entertained such a marked dislike to him, he should encourage him no longer.

"I am sure that my father related to Vasquelon all that I had said, and told him that under the circumstances, he could permit him no longer to visit me, for he never came to the house any more. But I had my several months' experience in Madrid over again. I could not go out in the street without being followed by him, and this continued for several months after *you* and I became acquainted.

"I am sure that he knew of your visits to me, and," added Irona, in a lower tone, "that they were the only ones that were acceptable. That he entertains a deep-seated aversion to you I am certain, and I know he would not hesitate to do you all the ill in his power. You mentioned his wearing a large-rimmed *sombrero*. This first made me suspect his identity. He wore such a hat in Madrid, and has, in fact, ever since I knew him.

"About a month before you started with Colonel Ovation to this country, he left New Orleans, and we know that he must have gone to Texas. I saw nothing more of him until a few days since.

"Three days after your departure father asked me how I should like to visit his brother in Texas. He had resided in Austin for many years, and had long held a promise that I should visit him upon my return from Europe. I am sure there was something deeper than this mere promise that led my father to make this proposition, else he never would have allowed me to go without his own company. At any other time, I am sure I should have refused; but, I reflected that you would be absent three or four months, during which the time would pass drearily if I remained at home. Furthermore, my own visit was to be two months only, there seemed no danger attending it, and I had a strong love for travel—so I decided to make the visit.

"Two faithful attendants accompanied me, and we left New Orleans the next day. I did not know precisely what portion of Texas was your destination, and had no idea that we were really following in your track. We encountered a severe storm in crossing the Gulf, and were delayed several days in reaching Matagorda. We finally ascended the river to Austin, where, upon disembarking, I learned that my uncle had been absent in Mexico for a long time and consequently had not received the letter which my father had sent a month before notifying him of my intended visit. His family—his wife and one daughter—received me with the greatest cordiality, and insisted that I should remain until he returned, which they were sure would be within a few weeks. I consented, and several days passed pleasantly away.

"Marie—my cousin—and I, attended by two servants, used to wander about the town toward the close of the day, and many hours we thus beguiled together. The second day of my arrival, I met a man in the city that I had seen before with Vasquelon. He was small in stature, and his features resembled those of an Indian. I thought little of it, although I remember he followed me for a considerable distance.

"The next evening Marie and I fell into an interesting conversation, and extended our walk much further than we ever had before. We had just turned to retrace our steps, when we heard a scream from our attendants, and looking up saw a score of hideously-painted Indians, riding rapidly toward us. We were fully a quarter of a mile from the nearest house of the town, and flight was useless. We therefore stood pale and trembling until they came up. Before reaching us, they separated in the form of a circle and then rapidly closed around us. Instead of offering harm, one of the Indians stooped from his horse, lifted me upon it, and they all rode away. The next morning I was given in charge of three,

one of whom I recognized through his paint as the man that had followed and watched me closely the day before. My rescue from these three is already known to you."

"Did not the Indians harm or carry away your cousin or any of the servants?"

"Not one; they did not seem even to notice them. This makes me think my abduction was arranged beforehand."

"It was, most certainly; and Vasquelon, the villain, is the one who arranged it."

"It must be so. Until I learned from you that he was in this section of the country, I supposed it only an artifice of this white man who has been killed, to secure a ransom for me—he knowing that a heavy one could be secured. Oh, Ross! you do not know how much I dread to meet this Vasquelon again!"

"As long as this arm has strength he shall not even approach you!"

"Do you believe he is following us?"

"I should not be surprised if he were. His particular genius seems to be that of the hound. I think, if he really be following us, he will reach the end of the trail. He has attempted my life, and I am justified in seeing that another opportunity is not given him. But yonder is quite an elevation, which will afford us an extended view of the prairie. We will ascend that and see whether there are any friends or enemies visible."

CHAPTER IX.

FUGITIVES.

WELLAND ascended the elevation, and with an anxious eye he swept the horizon, every part of which, from his standpoint, was visible. The vast extent of prairie which lay beneath his gaze was threaded by numerous streams, and crossed by belts of timber and patches of woodland. In the west could be seen a black, undulating mass, which Welland knew to be a herd of buffaloes. But, Welland saw no human being.

"It seems we are alone," said he. "I can distinguish no person in all this broad expanse of prairie but ourselves. What is it that so interests you, Irona?"

She did not reply for a moment, she was so intently occupied.

"Do you see anything to alarm you?"

"Yonder is something that looks human," said she, pointing to the west.

"Yes, I see them—ah! they're gone again," added Welland as he lost them. The objects, whatever they might be, were like stars at midday. They could not be seen in the glare of the sunlight, unless the eye chanced to look directly at them, when they were so distinct and clearly defined that Welland could only wonder why he had not noticed them at the first glance, and while wondering suddenly lost them again.

"I see them now," he added, wrinkling his face with his efforts to keep his gaze fixed. "There are two—two horsemen, I suppose."

"Two?" repeated Irona, in astonishment. "There are surely three, riding in Indian file or in a straight line."

Welland looked again and again, but he saw the two only, and these were riding side by side. What was the cause of this discrepancy in their vision?

"I'll stake my life there are but two," said he, decidedly.

"And I know there are *three*!" said Irona, as positively.

It proved that both were right and both were wrong.

"Where is it you are looking?" asked Welland.

Irona pointed, and, following the direction of the finger, Welland saw, indeed, three horsemen, and Irona, under his guidance distinguished the other two, so the discrepancy was explained.

"Now, who can those different parties be?" asked his companion.

"The two whom I first saw are undoubtedly Smith and Nuggens, the hunters."

"And the other three?"

"Are Colonel Ovation, Pierre Choujeau and Vasquelon. The hunters appear to be going from us, as we might expect."

"And the others?"

"Are coming to us, as also we might expect."

"Do the parties see each other?"

"I think not. You notice there is a grove or rather belt of timber between them. Our pursuers are evidently aware of the proximity of the hunters, and are purposely keeping themselves concealed from their view. I am sorry for this; for had they not seen the hunters, they would still have believed they were in our company, and naturally enough would have considered us too strong to be insulted with impunity. Besides, if Smith and Nuggens know who were in their neighborhood, they could have easily prevented their own presence from being known. I am sorry at this state of matters."

"You then really believe we are pursued?"

"Most certainly we are."

"Can they see us?"

"They can, but I do not think they do. I will drive down the other side of the hill where we shall be secure from observation."

"How will they be enabled to find us?"

"They are on the trail of my horse, and that infernal Pierre Choujeau, I believe, could track a bird through the air."

"But can they overtake us? Your animal, you say, is a fleet one."

"Ah! my dear Irona, do you not see how utterly unavailing his fleetness is? All three of our enemies are well mounted, and each has only his accustomed rider to carry. Swiftuess of foot will not save us."

"But you will not have the temerity to sit still and surrender?" asked Irona, with some excitement.

"As long as I have life you shall be safe from all three of those villains. I shall do my utmost to effect our escape."

"Forgive my suspicion, dear Ross. Pray tell me how you expect to accomplish it."

"It can only be done by stratagem. They must be thrown off our trail."

"I cannot understand how that is possible. You say one of them is wonderfully skillful in tracking a person."

"He is, but I believe I can outwit him."

CHAPTER X.

ON THE ISLAND.

WELLAND and Irona were now galloping over the prairie in a southeast direction, at the distance of a mile from the Rio Colorado.

"How do you hope to elude our pursuers, if not by hurrying forward?" asked Irona.

"By going backward," replied Welland.

"By going backward!" repeated his companion.

"Ay, by that very means. To mystify you no longer, I will explain. I have been reflecting how they could be avoided ever since we started. That it cannot be done by direct flight is evident to both of us. We must, therefore, make some move which will throw them off our trail, at least until we shall have placed fifty miles between us, which will give us abundant time to reach the frontier settlements. They are still a good distance in the rear, and we need have no apprehensions of being troubled by them before to-morrow."

"But, Ross, they do not know that I am with you, and I think, or at least hope, they will not persist in pursuing you, knowing, as they do, that your horse cannot be overtaken by theirs."

"Most certainly they do know you are with me, or I should not care a fig for this pursuit. How they have found out I can not tell—perhaps by this Comanche that escaped the hunters, or more likely Vasquelon himself learned it last night, although Smith seemed to think that he had but a glimpse at

the camp fire. No; they are certainly aware that we are together, and we may make up our minds that they will be relentless in their attempts to overtake us. This afternoon I shall drive into the Colorado, and turn my horse's head up stream, ascending so far, that when we strike the opposite bank it shall be a half-mile above the point where we entered. At night we will resume our journey, having given our animal a few hours' rest, and before they strike our trail, I think you will be forever safe beyond their reach. Now, what does my Irona think of my plan?" asked Welland, pressing her to him.

"It is a good one, I think; with Heaven's blessing it will avail."

"I know it will," added Welland, confidently.

The day was rather warm, and, ere it was quite noon, Welland halted for a few moments to rest their horse and partake of the food they had brought with them. This done, he turned the head of the animal toward the river, and in a short time had reached the bank. Welland took a careful survey of the shores, and then rode in. The sagacious animal manifested considerable reluctance to enter the water, and had Welland reflected long enough to know the cause of this, he, too, would have hesitated.

The river was very shallow, averaging barely two feet in depth; but the bottom was muddy and soft, and several times the horse plunged heavily. He was headed directly across the stream, and after considerable labor had approached within a rod or two of the land. Welland then pulled his head around so as to point up-stream, and commenced ascending the river.

The horse seemed vexed, and was restrained with difficulty from making his way to land. He manifested a sort of agitation and terror that to Welland was unaccountable. Several times he snorted, shook his head, and reared his fore-feet out of the water while his rider, losing patience at his actions, plunged his spurs into him, and resolutely kept him in the stream.

A quarter of a mile was thus passed, and Welland was now between the mainland and a low, sandy island, the distance from each being about a dozen yards. The water was about twenty inches in depth, and very muddy and swift. The horse had quieted somewhat, although he turned toward the shore several times, and was not yet rid of his terror. Welland was on the point of making some remarks to Irona, when a gasping "My God!" from her arrested him. At the same moment the horse uttered a scream of agonized fear and sprung several feet out of water. Welland looked down, saw the huge, cavernous mouth of a monstrous alligator, whose long tail was thrashing the water into mud and foam, and which had glided directly under the horse's belly. The ponderous jaws snapped together, and again the horse made a leap so frenzied that in an instant Welland and Irona were thrown into the water.

In this dreadful moment our hero did not lose his presence of mind. Retaining a firm hold of Irona with his right arm, and of his rifle with his left hand, he stepped upon the crusted back of the floundering alligator, and making a leap toward the island, was upon its hard, compact surface in the twinkling of an eye. Looking back, then, he saw his horse, the bridle-rein streaming over his back, galloping furiously through the water, which, churned into muddy spray behind him, showed how closely the aquatic monster was pursuing them. The horse soon sprung upon the land, where he was safe, but with every sign of the wildest terror, he went careering over the prairie in a northern direction, until he vanished in the distance. Welland then turned toward Irona, and, in her face, read their fate. She was bearing bravely up; but while he had watched the flight of their horse, she had found time to look about her, and a glance told as much as a day's survey could. The island upon which they had taken refuge was about a hundred yards in length, of an

elliptical form, and probably fifty yards broad at its widest part. It was really nothing but a sand-bar, thrown up by the action of the river.

"You look despairing, Irona. I do not think we need give up hope yet. You wait here until I explore the island."

"You can do it just as well by standing where you are."

"Perhaps not. At any rate, it can do no hurt."

Welland walked over to the opposite end of the island, and then passed slowly around it, examining minutely every portion. He had hoped to find some drift-wood cast upon it, but he was disappointed. Not even the smallest twig did he discover, and when he returned to Irona it was impossible to keep up the semblance of hope with which he had left her.

"We cannot wade ashore?" she remarked, inquiringly.

"No; for the channel of the river is between the bank and us. I noticed the horse, when running from the alligator, once sunk nearly out of sight in the deep water. This must have been the channel, and it is over our heads."

"And look at those," said Irona, with an expression of painful disgust, pointing out into the river, where fully a half-dozen dirty, log-like objects were gliding backward and forward, as if in search of prey.

"Alligators, certainly, and Heaven only knows how we escaped them."

"It was they that frightened our horse, and they must have attacked him when he made such a spring out of the water."

"Will they not attack us?"

"Not unless we go into the water."

"Is there no wood on this island, Ross?"

"Not enough to make a lucifer match."

Irona looked inquiringly into Welland's face, and he read her question before she spoke it. It occurred to both at the same instant, and in an almost audible whisper they repeated it:

"How are we to leave this island?"

CHAPTER XI.

A NIGHT OF TERROR.

"How are we to leave this island?" It was a question which neither could solve. A few hours yet remained ere night would come—a night that Welland felt would be one of horror both to himself and his companion. He determined, for her sake, to affect a cheerfulness which he was far from feeling.

"Well, Irona," said he, laughingly, "don't you think we have outwitted them?"

"And ourselves, too, I am afraid," she answered.

"I told you I could throw that Pierre off our trail, and I feel certain that I have done it. I think the island will be the last place where he will look for us."

"If he follows the tracks of our horse to the river, will he not be enabled to see us? Yonder is the spot where we entered, and it can be seen very easily from this point."

"Perhaps so; and if he does, what good will it do them?"

"They can surely cross over to the island. They can do as much as we can."

"I only hope they will, and those alligators will make mincemeat of them."

"It can make little difference to us, because we must either perish here or fall into their hands."

"I do not see the danger of falling into their hands."

"Can not they come to this island in any manner except upon their horses? There is plenty of timber on the mainland—enough to float them all out to us."

Welland gave utterance to an exclamation of amazement. Strangely enough, he had not thought of this. Irona had spoken the truth; but he replied:

"After all, I do not think they will attempt it—I am pretty certain they will not."

"Why not? What is to prevent them?"

"It will prove too dangerous. Remember, I have my rifle and plenty of ammunition, and ere they reach us I will pick every one off the raft."

"You may be willing and able enough to do that; but you must reflect, Ross, that there are three against you, and that they will be more likely to shoot you."

"We cannot tell, Irona. God only can deliver us from this difficulty, and although it looks dark enough now, somehow I cannot help thinking every now and then that we are to remain here but a short time. In the mean time do not let us borrow trouble. It is getting dark now, and we will make preparations to pass our first and last night, I trust, upon this island of the Rio Colorado."

These preparations were necessarily very simple. The common hunter's blanket of Welland, which he had wrapped around Irona, when riding the horse, was saved when thrown into the water. He scooped out a hollow place in the sand, near the center of the island, and laying the blanket in it, offered it to her.

"Poor enough," said he, laughingly; "but I need not tell you it's the best accommodation the place affords."

"And how will you pass the night, dear Ross?"

"In watching over you."

"Heaven will do that, and I shall need no other protection."

"I have no disposition to sleep, Irona. Should I feel drowsy I will lie down upon the sand, and slumber a few hours. Have no alarm about me, however. I wish to be alone and think upon some plan of escape from this dreadful place. When you awaken, I think I shall have hit upon a means of relief. So go to sleep and be happy in dreams."

Welland walked away to the opposite end of the island, in order to leave his fair companion alone during her devotions.

It was over an hour before he returned, and when he did so, she was sleeping as if at home in her own father's house. Wrapped closely in the blanket, she was indeed the picture of "Sleeping Innocence." Her face looked sad and pale in the faint moonlight. Welland wondered how it could be otherwise. Poor Irona! How varied and singular had been her fortunes during the past few weeks. The child of affection and favor, even now a fugitive upon the prairies, pursued by foes whom she feared more than the wild Comanches, who so recently had been her captors. How she was to escape them, Welland indeed felt he could not tell; but as he looked upon the sweet melancholy face, he vowed that while he possessed the power, no human being unless a friend should set foot upon that island.

He recalled the words which Irona had uttered. There were three armed enemies to contend against, and it was an easy matter for either of them to shoot him from the shore. The bare, flat surface of the sand afforded him no protection in case they had a disposition to do so. He felt certain that the keen orbs of Pierre would not fail to note the island, when, of course, he would be instantly seen.

Then, too, they could easily construct a raft and float it over to the island and thus obtain Irona. This reflection stirred Welland up to more vigorous thought, and in a few minutes he had decided upon a plan to resist any approach of his enemies. A few yards from where Irona lay he commenced throwing up an embankment. In doing this he used the stock of his rifle, and as he encountered nothing but sand, it was not a work of great difficulty. He scooped out a large space, packing the sand in front, until he had a bank some four feet in height and as many yards in length. This he intended should protect Irona and his own person while he was firing upon his enemies—for he had fully made up his mind it would come to this.

To make matters sure, he constructed a similar

fortification in his rear, and upon the sides, so that should Colonel Ovaton and his friends cross the river at a point higher up, they would not be able to obtain an advantage over him in this manner. This labor occupied him some two hours, by which time the moon was high in the heavens; but its light was obscured by a number of clouds that were drifting across its face, and now and then shrouding the island in darkness.

Welland was viewing his miniature fort, and endeavoring to think of some means by which he could improve it, when he was startled by a noise in the water. Looking up, he saw with unspeakable horror a long, black object, resembling a tree-trunk, sliding over the land directly toward the spot where Irona was sleeping. The animal halted suddenly as he beheld a man before him, his fore parts balanced upon his Z-like legs, and ready to plunge backward or forward as his fancy should lead him. The light was favorable, and Welland could easily distinguish his fishy eyes fixed upon him. He was well aware of the avenue to the seat of life in this creature, and raising his rifle, so close that the muzzle almost touched him, he pulled the trigger. The animal seemed to be driven full ten feet backward by the force of the shot. He rolled over on his short legs, beat the air a moment, a spasmodic quiver ran through his body, and he was dead.

As the report of the rifle rung out over the water, Welland saw fully a dozen of these creatures swim hurriedly away from the shore, which it seemed they were upon the point of invading. There was now another cause for his watching through the night. Welland carefully reloaded his rifle, and took his position near Irona.

"Was that the report of your rifle that awoke me?" she asked, somewhat bewildered.

"I suppose so, as I have just fired."

"What at?"

"This fellow here," replied Welland. "He was rather imprudent in exposing himself and I thought to teach him caution."

"Don't let them come too near, Ross, they're horrid animals."

"I will take good care that they do not. Lie down again, my dear, and sleep as sweetly as you may."

Irona drew the blanket close around her, and lay back, while Welland betook himself to watching again. He carefully surveyed his fortification from the outside, and, satisfied that it was as impregnable as it could be made, he stepped within it, and kneeling down, placed his rifle over the top to see how well his aim would serve.

The clouds at this moment drifted clear of the moon, and the dark line of the northern shore was distinctly visible. His rifle-barrel glistened in the moonlight, and, following its direction, Welland saw with unspeakable astonishment that it was aimed directly at a human being upon the shore. Standing upon the bank, in full relief against the blue sky, was the form of a man, as motionless as a statue. The outline of his body was distinctly drawn, but the body itself, from its peculiar position, was perfectly black, so that the features and peculiarities of dress could not be made out. But the large flapping *sombrero* told unmistakably who he was.

Three times the hammer of Welland's rifle was raised, and three times his finger pressed the trigger until it was ready to fall again. But a feeling, unaccountable to himself, restrained him. Perhaps it looked too much like murder, this shooting a man without a moment's warning; but more probably it was his natural repugnance to taking human life that prevented him.

"It will do him good if I give him warning of the risk he is running," thought Welland, sighting his rifle again. But Vasquelon had disappeared; he had descended the bank to the water's edge, and was hid from view by the shore itself. A moment later, the half-doubled form of Pierre Choujeau skurried over the bank and also disappeared. Welland rightly

judged they were examining the shore, and knowing they would attempt nothing during the night, he gave himself no immediate concern regarding them.

It was well that Welland withdrew his attention to the danger that was nearer. The sleeping Irona was not six feet from him, and another huge alligator was not that distance from her. His long, shovel-like head was pushing forward upon the earth, approaching slowly and with evident fear, but nevertheless approaching with certainty. Welland sprang toward the monster, and jamming the muzzle of his rifle almost in his eye, sent the whole charge through the creature's brain. The unwieldy brute died after a few struggles, and his companions, many of which were but a few yards distant, scattered to the water, frightened by the flash and report of the gun. The explosion did not fully awaken Irona. She muttered something, and merely turning her head, was instantly unconscious again.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RAFT.

It required most unceasing watchfulness to keep the alligators at bay. It was not the death of two of their number that did this, but the flash and sound of Welland's gun. Whenever this weapon was discharged, all hurriedly left the island, to return, however, in a few minutes. Welland fired in among them without aim, as it would have been a vain effort to attempt to thin them out. The bullet striking their impenetrable backs glanced off as if it had encountered solid rock, and the alligators were probably unaware of having been touched at all.

The constant firing shortly awakened Irona, and she watched with Welland until morning. So soon as it was fairly light, all the alligators took to the river again, and the two were safe now at least from them.

But there were foes still more to be dreaded, and Welland's attention was now wholly directed toward them. Carefully scanning both shores, neither he nor Irona could detect any signs of their presence, but were satisfied they were somewhere near at hand.

"You first saw them, Irona, yesterday," said Welland, "and perhaps you will see them first to-day. Have you examined the shore yonder?"

"I see nothing of them, but you notice the dirt is broken down along the bank directly opposite us. Is that the place where you saw Vasquelon and Pierre last evening?"

"That is the spot, and the dirt and *d'bris* must have been loosened by them. It is singular they do not show themselves. They cannot be afraid."

"It is some plan of theirs. They may be waiting to obtain a glimpse of you."

"Just like them. They cannot be very near the shore, as there is no place that will hide their bodies from our view. There is grass, but it is too short to answer for that purpose, and as they all have horses, they must be picketed some distance away."

"Ross," said Irona, as if speaking in a reverie, "look again at the spot where they descended the bank. It seems to me their tracks are visible close to the water's edge."

Welland followed the line of the shore for some distance, but his own position being about equally depressed, he could see the trail but a few feet from the starting-point.

"There is a point about a hundred feet further down-stream," said Irona, "where it seems to me they have ascended the bank again. I think I see the prints of their feet in the bank. In this direction."

In his anxiety, Welland forgot discretion, and arose to his feet in order to obtain a better view of the suspicious signs pointed out by his fair companion.

"Be careful, Ross, our—"

He dropped instantly to the ground as a bullet whistle within an inch of his face, and went skimming over the water behind.

"Where did that shot come from?" he asked, excitedly. "Ah! I see the spot."

A thin wreath of smoke was rising from the grass, at the point which Irena had pointed out as the one where Pierre and Vasquelon had ascended, and at this point Welland aimed his rifle and discharged it. A low, taunting laugh was the reply, as the *sombrero* of Vasquelon rose to view, and with a threatening gesture he retreated out of sight.

"I've been a fool the second time," exclaimed Welland, impatiently. "Last night I had a chance to put that villain out of the way, and I didn't do it. If I ever let another chance pass, I hope he will put me out of the way."

"Still it was for the best, and regrets can do nothing," rebuked Irena.

Welland and Irena, it will be remembered, were behind the embankment which our hero had constructed. His companion, at his suggestion, seated herself upon the blanket and kept entirely out of sight. Not that he apprehended any danger for her, but he wished to be entirely alone, and rely upon his own arm in the coming danger. He was confident that their assailants would be unceasing in their watchfulness, and would hesitate at no means to outwit and overtake him.

It was therefore with considerable astonishment that he saw Vasquelon appear again upon the riverbank, bearing a stick in his hand, with a handkerchief fluttering from the end as a flag of truce.

"Hello, there!" called out Vasquelon, in broken English.

"What do you want?" asked Welland, in turn.

"Why don't you show yourself? We want to talk with you."

"I can hear you as well from this place as I could by stepping out from it. If you have any question to ask, ask it, and I will do as I please about answering it."

"What are you doing, then, on that bar?"

"Doing nothing, except to keep you villains off of it."

"Hah! How long do you intend to stay there?"

"Until we choose to go. At present it is as comfortable quarters as we could possibly wish."

"We would like to come over and see you, if you do not care about it."

"Under the circumstances, I must positively decline receiving any visitors."

"But suppose we insist?"

"Then I shall *revenge*. If the alligators allow you to put off from the shore, I think I shall have time to shoot some of you before you land, and you may be assured, friend Vasquelon, that I shall not hesitate to do it."

"Hah! you talk big. The alligators sleep soundly at noon when the sun is hot, and we have no fear of them. We can easily reach you."

"And my good rifle can easily reach you. Juarez Vasquelon, there is no need of you and I bandying words. I know you and your objects, and it is about time you knew me. You are seeking Irena Seraville, and will hesitate at no villainy to obtain her. Ere you do this, you must pass over my dead body."

"Do not think, *Americano*, that will be long, either. Have you food on that island to last forever? Perhaps you will dine to-day off the alligators?"

"Before you shall be allowed to set foot on this little island I will."

"A very delightful dinner for the senorita and you."

"Make no answer to such insulting remarks," whispered Irena.

"Juarez Vasquelon, as I trust we fully understand each other, our conversation may as well terminate."

"Your pardon, but I trust you are not in earnest in saying you wish to remain upon that horrid mass of sand."

"I most certainly am."

"But you will perish. There is nothing there to support life."

"I comprehend my situation as well as you do."

"We intend no harm to either of you—we—"

"What meant that shot a few minutes ago?"

"It was only a warning—an intended miss. As I was saying, we wish no harm to either of you."

"Why do you persist in pursuing us?"

"My only wish is to restore Don Alfredo Seraville's daughter to him, for he is distracted at her loss."

"That is false," whispered Irena, "for he cannot know anything of it."

"I pledge myself to do that," replied Welland.

"But how? Your situation doesn't look much like it now."

This was a puzzling question to Welland, and he hardly knew what answer to make, but he was fully determined to yield nothing.

"Unfavorable my situation is, I will confess; but, for all that, the probabilities of Miss Seraville's return would not be increased by changing hands with you. Therefore, I must again decline receiving any assistance from you."

"But we pledge our honor that no harm shall be offered either of you. You shall be allowed to go free, and senorita shall be restored to her agonized father at once, or you may accompany her. Senor Welland, cannot object to this."

"I tell you, Juarez Vasquelon, your proposals are useless, and I have no wish to converse further with you. I have given you my determination, and you need not think to change it. Let all intercourse now end."

"Hah! ha!" laughed Vasquelon, with his insulting, taunting tone, "will Senor Welland glance up the river and tell us what he thinks of what he sees?"

A glance, indeed, was sufficient to show Welland how completely he had been duped. Right under his own eyes, in range of his unerring rifle, Colonel Ovaton and Pierre Chouveau had constructed and launched a raft with which to float out to the island. The flag of truce, the conversation, was only a ruse of Vasquelon's to divert his attention until this contrivance was finished. The minute Welland realized the trick which he had been served, he raised his rifle to shoot the author of it; but that individual had wisely withdrawn, and with his flag of truce was beyond danger.

Had it been nothing more than a mere raft, Welland would have little occasion for alarm, as he could have kept them at bay with his rifle, but, as we have termed our hero's protection a fort, this might have been called a floating battery. It was constructed of light, cork-like logs and limbs, evidently collected with considerable difficulty, fastened together, and having a breastwork erected upon it, behind which the men could work it as they pleased.

Now and then the head of one of the party flitted to view, and Vasquelon suddenly flitted upon it. The three then commenced their efforts to launch. Their united work sunk it into the mud, and as they dared not expose themselves, it required considerable labor before it was accomplished. Welland, still hoping to prevent the attempt, called out:

"Colonel Ovaton, do you hear me?"

"Wal, what's wanting, my fine fellow?"

"Do you intend to make the attempt to land upon this island?"

"We don't just intend it, but we calculate to do it. If you've got any affairs you want settled, I advise you to make your will."

"Colonel Ovaton," said Welland, rising to his feet, in spite of the remonstrance of Irena, "Colonel Ovaton, I have no desire for your blood, and I now give you fair warning of what I shall do. Before you can effect a landing upon this spot, I can at least shoot one of you; if you persist, that one shall be you, for I believe you are at the bottom of this mischief."

"Save your talk, for it can't serve you any," replied Ovaton.

"Come on then,"—and Welland sunk down within his fortification.

The raft at this instant swung clear, and Welland

could see by the ends of the poles in their hands that they were busy guiding it toward the island. The protection which they had erected upon it came about to their shoulders, so that they were obliged to labor in a stooping position. As it would be several minutes before they could reach the bar, Welland concluded to try the effect of a shot upon the concern. He fired directly at the center of the pile of limbs and logs, and his shot had a better effect than he could have dared to wish. The fortification was merely a loose pile, which instantly tumbled down as the ball cut through it, exposing the three persons behind. Welland commenced reloading as fast as in his power, while his enemies hastily gathered the logs before them again. They threw several on top of each other, intent on protecting themselves. The consequence was that by the time our hero's rifle was loaded, they were safe from his aim.

The current of the Rio Colorado at this point is very swift, and the time lost by those upon the raft was too great to be recovered. Stooping over on their knees, they plied their guiding poles with great diligence, but, when abreast the upper part of the island, they saw their distance was too great, and crouching behind the protection, they made ready to deliver their shots in passing.

Welland was expecting this, and the only inconvenience he suffered was from the sand which their bullets scattered in his face. He discharged his rifle in return, but with no effect, except to make the three shrink closer to the logs beneath them.

The raft drifted on down-stream for a quarter of a mile, when, feeling safe from any rifle-bullet, the three arose and worked it in to the northern shore.

"There is one danger passed," said Welland, "and let us prepare for the next."

CHAPTER XI.

THE LAST NIGHT UPON THE ISLAND.

THE day proved to be unusually hot. The situation of our hero and heroine was almost intolerable. The sand was burning to the touch, and seemed to give forth scorching volumes of air that nearly suffocated them. A tormenting thirst was felt by both Irona and Welland, but neither spoke to the other of it. They had no wish to increase their sufferings by useless complainings.

The two alligators, stretched upon the sand, and subject to the full force of the blazing sun, commenced to putrefy, and in a few hours were so bloated that their skins seemed distended to bursting. They were hideous objects, distorted thus to such an unusual size, and Welland felt willing to risk the chance of a stray shot, if he could have rolled them into the river and allowed them to float away. As yet no disagreeable smell came from them, but another twenty-four hours would be sufficient to make their presence unendurable.

Nothing further was seen of their enemies, and he half suspected they had retired to some cool spot to wait until a more convenient season before they made another attempt against him. Still, he was too cautious to expose himself, and he resolutely kept within his fortification for nearly the entire day. At sunset his own thirst was so dreadful, that he arose, and walking to the river's edge, lay down and quaffed his fill. The muddy waters of the Rio Colorado tasted sweeter to him than could the nectar of the gods, and no pleasure could have been greater than that he experienced when he felt that he could drink no more. Joining his hands, he scooped up a quantity and carried it to Irona. She endeavored to conceal her thirst, but Welland saw how eagerly she swallowed it, and he passed backward and forward several times before she was satisfied.

This movement of Welland's, made as it proved to be without danger, convinced him of one thing. No further attempt for some time would be made to land upon the island. Colonel Ovaton and his companions had withdrawn to some distance and would

only return at occasional intervals to look at them. They would wait, until convinced that he and Irona were so weakened by suffering and privation that they could offer no resistance, when they would make their way out to them upon rafts, without running any risk.

As it was growing dark, Welland saw the *sombrero* of Vasquelon appear upon the bank, and remaining stationary a moment, disappear again. The fellow had come down to the bank, and satisfied himself that his victims were safely cared for, and then returned to report the same to Colonel Ovaton.

This night was without a moon until late in the evening. Welland had some apprehensions of his enemies using a raft and coming down upon the island in the darkness; and leaving his fortification every few minutes, he walked to the upper part of the island, and long and anxiously looked out in the night, fearing that every moment the dread object would loom up to view. But there were good reasons for feeling safe upon this point. The alligators, formidable enemies, were active and watchful through the night. It was only during the middle of the day, when basking in the sunshine, that they were so sleepy and indifferent as to be passed in safety.

Another night upon the island! How wearily the hours dragged by; how monotonous sounded the soft wash of the Rio Colorado; how oppressive was the silence of the dark, level shore! The black masses gliding over the sand, the snouts plowing through the water, the loathsome temerity of the creatures themselves, were too horrible to be borne.

For the first time he gained an adequate idea of the situation of himself and Irona. He began to feel the pangs of hunger, and the river-water could only be drunk when very thirsty. What was to be the end of this? Were they to be starved until they could make no resistance? What would be done with them when they fell into their enemies' hands? Ah, there could be but one answer to this question.

The hours wore on, and once more the bright sun rose upon them. The day gave evidence of being as warm and harassing as the previous one. The two alligators lay stretched upon the sand, having been undisturbed by their companions. They were swelled to double their usual size, and when Welland looked upon them, it was with the determination to heave their carcasses in the river. He was rising for this purpose, when Irona touched his arm.

"Yonder is Vasquelon, if I mistake not," said she.

The *sombrero* was visible, and in a moment it was followed by the swarthy face of the owner himself. He stood a few moments perfectly motionless, offering a strong temptation to Welland's skill. To the surprise of the latter, he called out:

"Are you there, Senor Welland?"

"Let that answer," said the latter, firing his piece at his head. The *sombrero* suddenly ducked out of sight, and a thrill passed through Welland as he thought he might be fortunate enough to have finished the rascal; but the head soon appeared again.

"That was a bad trick—a bad trick, Senor Welland. It will serve you no good turn. It came very nigh my face."

"I only regret it failed to strike it," called out Welland.

"Ha! ha! your gun is not true enough," added Vasquelon, taking good care, however, that a second opportunity was not afforded to test its accuracy. "Howsumever, we'll let that pass. How do you like your present quarters upon the island? How is senorita pleased with them?"

"We prefer them just now to the shore."

"I've no doubt of it! I've no doubt of it. How long do you intend to remain?"

"It's time you learned that we remain as long as

we choose, and besides, that we intend to keep you off equally long."

"No doubt of it at all. We can afford to wait, and are quite willing just now."

"Have you any further questions to ask?"

"Nothing in particular that I think of just now."

"I have a few then to propose. Will you answer them?"

"As well as Senor Welland has mine."

"When are you coming upon this island?"

"We haven't decided yet, but probably not before three or four days have passed."

"Why not sooner?"

"To tell the truth, Colonel Ovaton and I have found out that it is useless risk. That infernal gun of yours may by accident harm some of us. There's no need of that. We don't think you'll feel particularly anxious then about shooting. Good idea, eh?"

"You intend to wait till I'm starved into submission?"

"That's what we intend, I guess."

"In other words, you three are afraid to attack me?"

"Not afraid—only prudent. We can well afford to wait."

"Why not remain upon the bank?"

"Ha! ha! I'm afraid Senor Welland would hardly respect a flag of truce if we reared it above our heads."

"I have no further questions to ask. You can depart now."

"I suppose you will wait there until we see you again?" asked Vasquelon, with a taunting laugh. Welland made no answer, except to adjust his rifle (which he had managed to load during the conversation) so as to fire at him. The villain, however, was too cunning to be caught by this stratagem. He had suspected all along that Welland had no object in continuing the discourse between them, except to gain time. He kept his eye continually fixed upon him and very discreetly took himself away before another bullet was sent after him.

"He is gone," muttered Welland, with some disappointment in his tone. "He will not appear again until near night. Irona, those dead objects out there must be removed. Our situation is bad enough without having it made worse by their presence."

"Do not go out yet. Vasquelon may be hid along the shore, and waiting for you to show yourself."

"No fear of that. He and the others are safe under some shade. He thinks there is no need of picking me off. He feels sure of both of us."

"And is he not?" asked Irona, in a low voice.

"I will move those animals at once," said Welland hurriedly, pretending not to have heard his remark. He could make no answer to that question.

He stepped over the embankment and moved away toward the alligators.

CHAPTER XIV.

A NOVEL RIDE.

IRONA'S attention was attracted by an exclamation from Welland. Looking up, she saw him acting like a madman. He was jumping about, dancing on the sand, swinging his hands and making the most excited demonstrations of joy.

"What is the matter!" she asked, concealing her own agitation as well as she could.

"What is the matter?" repeated he. "Matter enough! Do you wish to remain on this island any longer?"

"Not if it can be helped."

"It can be helped—of course it can! What a fool I was not to think of it before."

Irona all this time was narrowly watching the face of Welland to discover whether he really possessed his senses. The latter, noticing this, burst into a laugh.

"Do you think I am crazy, Irona? I believe I am somewhat so, but I have still some sense left. Can't you understand the cause of my joy?"

"I certainly cannot. Do explain yourself."

"Look yonder," said Welland, pointing to the water's edge, where the bodies of the two alligators lay.

Irona did as requested, and a suspicion of the truth crossed her mind.

"I see you understand," said Welland, eagerly watching her countenance. "These creatures that have been such a pest are to be the means of our salvation!"

Irona, at his request, stepped out from the breast-work and with him approached the two alligators. They lay upon the surface of the water, where their bodies floated like corks. To show the feasibility of his plan, Welland walked out upon the broad breast of one, which was so bloated and buoyant that nearly one half remained above the surface. It did, indeed, somewhat resemble a miniature flat-boat, the head serving as a prow, and the tail, drooping in the water, serving as a huge rudder, while the legs sticking up served as stanchions by which to hold on.

"We will lash these two together," said he, "when a steamer would not carry us more safely than they."

"But the living alligators?" repeated Irona, with an inquiring expression.

"It is now midday, and they are sleeping like logs. We can brush their noses without arousing them."

"You are very hopeful, Ros; I, too, am anxious to make the attempt, as we cannot by any possible result make our situation worse."

The creatures were floated side by side, and stepping upon the breast of one, Welland lashed them firmly together by their legs and long tails, by means of strips torn from his blanket. It required but a few minutes, when the two stepped upon their curious boat, which, yielding to the force of the stream, drifted away.

That was a novel ride, indeed! As the swift current gained control over them, they were borne rapidly downward as if propelled by the force of several oars. On every side the black, dirty forms of the sleeping alligators lay, inanimate as logs. Irona looked upon these with unspeakable terror, as she expected an onslaught from them. The carcasses beneath them drifted head down the stream, guided by their tails! More than once they rubbed the bodies of one of the live monsters, which merely floundered a little, or more often did not notice it at all. It was their sleeping-time, and something unusual was required to arouse them.

Welland's great anxiety was lest Vasquelon should return to the shore before they had gone far enough down the river to be beyond his sight. The probability was that this would not occur, and yet the possibility was enough to keep him in a fever of fear. He kept his eyes fixed upon the point where the villain generally made his appearance, until, with unspeakable relief, it was hid from view by a bend in the river. After an hour's ride their boat swept close to the river's bank, when Welland sprung ashore and soon had his unwieldy craft fast.

"Now for home," said Welland, hopefully. "I am sure there can be no greater danger before us than the one through which we have just passed."

"I am sure there is sufficient. There are the white men and the red-men who are our enemies."

"Very true; but the settlements can be at no great distance. I believe we can reach them in a day or two. Are you able to walk?"

"Yes, or to run when it is necessary. I shall not tire before you do."

"We will get a little further from the river, so as not to be seen by any who chance to be upon the other side, and we will then follow the course of the stream, as that is probably the most direct route to the settled parts of the country. I trust we will soon come upon some game, when we will enjoy a feast for the first time in a good while."

"I am not very hungry, but feel somewhat faint."

Welland saw that his fair companion was weaker

and more exhausted than she would admit; and, although progress was now the most important object with him, he resolved to make a halt as soon as a suitable resting-place could be found, where they might rest until morning. The surrounding land was the common rolling prairie, interspersed, at long intervals, with belts or groves of timber. These were generally where a small stream flowed into the Colorado, the trees lining the banks. While on the island, Welland was enabled to see one of the oases in the distance, its soft, blue outlines blending like a cloud with the horizon. This was now but a mile or two away, and toward this he bent his footsteps.

The sun lacked several hours of setting when his resting-place was reached, and he commenced his preparations for passing the night in it. A stream of icy-cold water gurgled through the center, while the trees and shrubbery fringing its banks were dense, and afforded an admirable concealment. A suitable spot was selected, when Welland threw down his blanket (somewhat the worse for having a portion lost) for Irona, and then departed to seek the wherewithal for the evening meal.

Animal life is abundant in Texas, especially in this portion, and it was not long before our hero secured a couple of plump rabbits, so unaccustomed to the sight of a man that he killed them with a blow from his gun merely. Fuel was plenty, and in a short time they were furnished with a steaming, nourishing supper, such as would be acceptable to many a person in a far more civilized country. This completed, night was at hand.

"I think it best that the fire should go out, as the darkness comes on," remarked Welland, after a few moments of thought. "I will keep watch while you sleep, Irona, for it would not do for us both to be unconscious at the same time."

"You have slept but little during the past few days, dear Welland, and I am sure I care little about sleeping—"

"Tut, tut, you foolish little thing. Be still, now, like a good little girl; say your prayers, shut your eyes and go to sleep."

Irona evidently concluded it best to obey her protector, for she said no more. Welland carefully wrapped the blanket around her, arranged her position in the most comfortable manner possible, and then kissed her a good-night. Wearied and exhausted by her unusual sufferings, she soon sunk into a dreamless slumber.

Welland, seeing that she was breathing regularly, and probably would not awaken for many hours, arose, and carefully made his way out of the grove. As he emerged upon the open prairie, he noticed that the night was clear, with starlight, devoid of a moon, which would not rise till far toward morning.

Welland stood a full half-hour, carefully scrutinizing every object around him. Then, satisfied for the present that there were no human beings in the vicinity, he moved off toward the Colorado, scarce a half-mile distant. It was his intention to make his way to it, in order to ascertain whether Colonel Ovaton and his companions had yet learned their flight. He had gone a short distance, however, when it suddenly occurred to him that he was acting very imprudently in leaving Irona alone at such a time. There might be wild beasts prowling in the vicinity, who, attracted by the smell of the roasted meat, would not hesitate to attack her, while she had no means for defending herself. More than this, he could not avoid the singular impression that there were human foes in the grove, and that his own presence was needed. He could give no cause for the suspicion, but felt it, nevertheless. Indeed, it increased every moment, until it had well-nigh settled into a firm belief that some great and dreadful danger threatened Irona.

With a heart beating with the most painful apprehension, he hurriedly retraced his steps, pausing once or twice for an instant to listen for some sound

but hearing nothing save the almost inaudible wash of the Rio Colorado. As he neared the grove he proceeded with great care and caution, for, as it's dark, gloomy shadow enveloped him, a shadow as dark and gloomy enveloped his spirit.

He moved on down the little streamlet, and was now within a few feet of the spot where he had left her—the dearest object on earth. He slowly arose from the ground, and his heart was in his mouth as he detected a dark mass which he knew was his blanket, enveloping her.

"Thank God, I was mistaken! I thought you were gone—"

He stopped short as he rested his hand upon the blanket, for no Irona was there!

CHAPTER XV.

A DEATH AND AN ALARM.

For a minute Welland scarcely breathed, so overcome was he at this astounding fact. He stood with his blanket in one hand, his rifle in the other, gazing down where he had last seen Irona lying. "What can it mean?" he asked himself again and again. At almost any other time he would have felt no apprehension at her absence; but, knowing that he had left her in a sleep almost as deep as death itself, he was certain something extraordinary must have occurred to awaken her—a sleep so heavy, indeed, that she might be lifted and carried away without knowing it.

"Oh, Heaven! after escaping these many dangers, grant that she may not be lost to me now," he exclaimed, in bitterness of spirit.

Reflecting that probably she was still within the grove, he at once set about searching every part, so far as lay in his power. He passed up and down the stream, crossed it again and again, paused and listened, and more than once repeated the loved name in a husky whisper. But no response came, save the gurgle of the brook, and the soft breath of the night-wind overhead.

"What devilish invention has spirited her away again?" he muttered. "I'll never return without her, or, if she is slain, without the lives of her murderers."

He was standing beneath a large tree as he muttered this. A few feet distant was a sapling. The top of this he saw suddenly incline downward, as if borne by a heavy weight, and the next moment a dark figure bounded lightly down in front of him.

"Is that you, Ross?" it asked.

"Good heavens! Irona, what does this mean?" asked Welland, with a recoil of astonishment.

"Sh! not so loud!" she admonished. "There are others near at hand. Have you not seen them?"

"Seen them? No; I had supposed you were carried off."

"I came pretty near it, I can tell you."

"Who by? Where? How was it prevented?"

"I awoke too soon, but I will tell you all in a minute. Are you sure there is no one who will overhear us?"

"I have just hunted through and through the wood for you, and have seen nothing of anybody else."

"They have withdrawn, then. They are out on the prairie."

"But I have been there, too, Irona, and saw nothing of them."

"They were there, nevertheless. Remember, I saw one of them myself."

"You say *they*. What do you mean?"

"You must know it can be no other but those *thieves*," replied Irona, in a meaning voice.

"But, Irona, explain what you mean," urged Welland, taking her hand in his, and drawing her to him.

"I presume you left me shortly after I fell asleep?" she asked.

"Yes, I had some misgivings about those infernal villains that are following us, and went out on the prairie to see whether they were anywhere

near. I had been gone but a short time, when I reflected that I was leaving you in great danger, and immediately retraced my steps only to find you gone, however, and, as I thought, irrevocably so."

"It must have been a few minutes after you left that it occurred, though it seemed several hours to me. You remember I was sleeping very soundly. I remained thus a short time, when all at once I opened my eyes, as sensible and as wide awake as I am at this moment. What it was that aroused me I cannot tell. I opened my eyes, and without moving the rest of my body, raised my head and looked around me. Standing not ten feet distant, on the same side of the stream with myself, I discovered the *sombrero* of Juarez Vasquelon. I knew that you must be absent or this could not have occurred. He seemed to be listening, for he stood several minutes without stirring, and then with a stealthy step he approached. How my heart beat as I saw his hated form coming nearer to me. I was on the point of screaming out, when he passed me and went on down-stream. The instant I dared do so, I arose, leaving the blanket where it lay, and hurried further into the wood; but, fate seemed to have decreed that I should not escape him, for several times I came within a hair's-breadth of walking directly into his arms. This so alarmed me that I ascended this tree, and (could you believe it?) five minutes after, he passed directly under it. But I saw no more of him. I heard you and took you for him until you paused here and spoke, when, as you know, I descended to you."

"You have had a narrow escape, Irona. How is it possible that Vasquelon and I failed to encounter each other when we were both searching in the grove at the same time?"

"I think he must have gone out as you entered, or very shortly after."

"One thing, however seems settled. Those three have learned of our escape from the island, and are pretty certain that we are in this grove."

"I do not think they are certain of this, but probably they have suspected we would take refuge here, and have thought they might come upon us when we were asleep, and thus secure us without trouble. This, I think, is the reason why Vasquelon entered and searched the wood to night."

"If he finds me asleep, I hope he will get me without trouble. Heavens! what a pity we could not have stumbled upon each other when we were both searching for you."

"It is best, I think that you did not. The others must be close at hand, and you could not have saved yourself against all three."

"We must do it, however, to-morrow, for then, I am convinced, the last struggle—the struggle of life and death—must come."

"Is there not room for concealment somewhere near us?"

"There may be, but it can avail us nothing. We are regularly besieged, as much as we were upon that island; but our circumstances are considerably improved, and I have hopes of making a better resistance. But Irona, it is yet early in the night; you are worn out and exhausted, and I have no idea what privations and sufferings are in store for you; let me insist, therefore, that you take that rest which your system so much needs."

"If you think it best, dear Ross, I will do so, although with this dreadful danger threatening us, I have little disposition to sleep."

"I will watch over you, and you need have no fear."

Irona obeyed him like a child. The blanket which Welland had brought with him was once more spread upon the ground, and in a few minutes she was again unconscious. Welland took his station near her, prepared to wait and watch until morning.

Hour after hour wore on without anything occurring to alarm him. Twice he detected a splash in the brook, as though made by the step of some creature, but nothing further than this. The first hour was

spent by Welland in walking slowly backward and forward, when he sat down, content that he was able to remain awake in that position; but a drowsiness gradually overcame him, and he was on the point of passing off into forgetfulness when, for the third time, he heard the splash in the stream. He started up alert, cocked his rifle and stepped behind the tree underneath which Irona lay sleeping. He had stood here but a few moments, when he saw, rising above the bank of the stream, a broad Mexican *sombrero*. Welland's heart throbbed as he reflected that his most implacable enemy was now in his power. The hat rose higher and higher, until the shadowy outlines of the burly shoulder became visible. Then he sighted his rifle as well as possible. The distance was short and he was sure of his aim. He pressed the trigger—a flash, a sharp, quick report, a heavy fall, and then all was still.

"It's the private opinion of Señor Welland that Juarez Vasquelon will cease minding other folks' business," remarked our hero, coolly, proceeding to reload his rifle. "It's a bad practice to be spying another person's movements, and I wouldn't advise you to try it again."

He looked anxiously at Irona, to see whether the report had awakened her; but the pale, exhausted sufferer was sleeping as soundly as ever. Having now carefully reloaded his rifle, he stood on his guard, waiting further development of matters. He fully expected the appearance of Choufau or Ovaton, or both; but, as fully an hour passed without seeing or hearing anything of them, he began to think that Irona had been mistaken in supposing them in the grove. They were probably a good distance off, and Vasquelon had come forward to reconnoiter for himself.

With this belief he moved forward to examine the body. He found it as he expected, lying upon its back, and stone-dead. He secured the rifle and ammunition, and then dragged the body further down-stream, where it was not likely to be seen by Irona. While doing this, the *sombrero* dropped off. Feeling a curiosity to examine his features, Welland struck a match and held it up to his face. To his unspeakable dismay he saw that it was not Juarez Vasquelon, as he had supposed, but an entire stranger! He had never seen the man before, and consequently knew nothing of his identity.

This discovery both pleased and alarmed Welland. In the first place, he was confident he was an enemy, and he was therefore justified in slaying him; in the second place, it convinced him that as yet his three most dangerous enemies knew nothing of his whereabouts, and for the present he was therefore safe.

"On the whole, this is best as it is," he concluded, "for we stand a good chance of still eluding Colonel Ovaton and his brother villains, as they probably have not yet suspected our flight, and may not for several days."

But this pleasant illusion was soon dispelled. When the gray light of morning entered the grove, he passed out to the edge of the prairie to take a view of it. His first glance showed him Ovaton, Pierre and Vasquelon, mounted on their horses and riding leisurely toward the grove. Welland was in full view, and when a couple of hundred yards distant, was discovered by the latter, who pointed toward him, when all three reined up as if taken aback at his appearance in this place. Our hero stepped behind a tree, and, showing that he had two rifles, called:

"I warn you to come no nearer. It is time you understood me, and I solemnly swear that if a single one of you attempts to enter this grove, I will shoot him, as sure as he is within range. You see I have two rifles; and if you wish to know whether they are loaded, you have only to approach nigher."

"And where did Señor Welland get his second gun?" asked Vasquelon, placing his open hand beside his mouth, as if to direct his words.

"I took a stranger for Juarez Vasquelon, and shot him by mistake."

From the sensation which this announcement made, Welland felt certain that, whoever the stranger might be, he was one of their men, who had been sent forward to reconnoiter, and whose return they were probably looking for at that moment.

They remained consulting together for a considerable time, and then, singularly enough to Welland, Colonel Ovaton turned toward him and spoke:

"Ross Welland, it's about time this game was ended. None of us have had any designs upon you, but Vasquel here rightfully claims and shall have your companion, Senorita Irona. I now make you our last offer. If you yield her up, you will be allowed to pass unmolested upon your way; but if not, you shall never leave that grove."

The repetition of this insulting proposition so incensed Welland that he raised his rifle, and was aiming at the speaker even at that great distance, when he felt a slight touch upon his arm. Irona was standing at his elbow.

"Don't fire, Ross, for the distance is too great. Wait till they come nearer. You would now miss them, and they would rush upon you before you could reload."

"I don't believe the cowards can muster courage to approach. They have been standing there a half-hour already, and yet they hesitate."

"They are only forming their plans—"

"Ah! I understand them," interrupted Welland in an excited manner. "They are going to separate and approach the grove singly, in different directions."

Such really appeared their intention, as they were already some yards apart; but their design was suddenly frustrated. All three halted and gazed behind them, away out on the prairie, as if alarmed at the appearance, while Welland watched their movements with astonishment.

"They see something to alarm them," whispered Irona; "what can it be?"

"It may be only a ruse—no, it isn't either. See them ride together again. All three are half-frightened to death. How singular!"

Colonel Ovaton's arm was outstretched as though pointing to something in the distance, and his gestures were excited. Welland looked in the direction indicated, but he could see nothing, although he began to suspect the true cause of their fear.

"Danger threatens them, and it threatens us, likewise," said he.

"What can it be?" asked Irona.

"I feel convinced, although I have seen nothing of them, that a Company of Comanches are approaching."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE COMANCHES.

COLONEL OVATON and his companions suddenly commenced riding toward the grove.

"Halt!" commanded Welland, stepping out in full view and raising his rifle in a threatening manner. They did halt for an instant.

"A band of Comanche Indians are coming this way," said Ovaton, "and we are only seeking concealment from them. They may enter this grove, and you will be glad of our assistance to repel them in that case."

"I feel able to take care of myself, and you certainly ought to be by this time. I would as soon have the Comanches enter this timber as to have you. Therefore, I warn you for the last time to approach no nigher, for if you do, Colonel Ovaton, will be the first man to fall."

This declaration was in too decided language to be misunderstood. There was little time for the horsemen to spare in useless conversation. They consulted together a moment, and then, turning the heads of their animals to the eastward, they galloped away at the top of their speed.

"The Indians can be at no great distance," said Welland, "and it would be best to retreat further into the wood, where there is no danger of being

seen. You do so, Irona, while I will ascend this tree, and watch their movements."

Irona obeyed. Slinging one of the rifles over his back, Welland climbed the tree beneath which he had been standing. It was quite lofty, and he made his way to the top, where the leafy branches effectually concealed him, and where he was afforded a wide view of the prairie. Looking to the eastward he discerned Colonel Ovaton and his companions riding for dear life. They were not yet a mile distant, but they were going over the ground at a tremendous pace. Turning his gaze to the northwest, Welland encountered a sight that thrilled every nerve in his body. Not two miles distant were at least twenty Comanches coming on a full gallop toward him. Their glittering lances, each crowned with a bright, fluttering ribbon, after the manner of the Mexicans, were pointed upward, and were carried as regularly as the bayonets of a marching column. They had evidently seen the three whites, and without doubt were in pursuit, for they were going at full speed, although their bodies rose and fell as uniformly as the swells of the prairie. What was more, their splendid animals were gaining upon those of the whites, and while the race might be a long one, it was plain enough what the result would be, if the Comanches persevered.

Nearer and nearer came this frightful band, their dazzling dress flaunting in the air, and their horrid painted faces gleaming with all the passions of the ferocious savage. Welland held his breath as they thundered past, and not till they were full a mile away upon the prairie did he breathe free again. He then descended, and shortly rejoined Irona.

The grove in which our hero and heroine had sheltered themselves as we have already stated, rebounded with the smaller game usually found in forests; hence, they had no anxiety or trouble on the score of food. Whenever this was needed it was easily procured. On this occasion, in spite of the alarming circumstances by which they had been surrounded, they made a nourishing and substantial meal. At its conclusion, Irona said:

"Dear Ross, you have hardly rested a moment for the past two or three days. I do not now need rest, as I slept well last night. I hope you will, therefore, secure what you can during to-day."

Welland's own prudence told him that the advice should be followed. After playfully bidding his companion good-night, he lay down upon the ground, and slept. Irona busied herself in watching over him, occasionally wandering to the edge of the timber to look for signs of their enemies. Noon came and passed, and still Welland slept. She could not awaken him, for she knew he needed all the slumber that came to him.

An hour or so after the sun had passed its meridian, Irona was standing on the margin of the prairie, looking away in the horizon, when she heard the faint report of guns. They were at a great distance, but the report was clear and distinct. Once or twice they rattled like musketry, as though numbers were discharged nearly simultaneously, and then she either heard, or fancied she did, that clear, peculiar yell which a Comanche Indian sometimes makes when attacking a foe. A few minutes later a deep and oppressive stillness settled over the prairie.

"The Indians have overtaken the whites, and there has been a deadly struggle," she reflected, as she made her way back to where Welland was lying. "What the result has been I cannot tell, but it seems impossible that either Colonel Ovaton or one of his men should have escaped. What will the Indians do now? Will they return in this direction, and will they halt here? Heaven forbid!"

It was not until night was again settling over the prairie that Welland awoke. Irona deemed it best to acquaint him with the sounds which she had heard some hours before, and to give her suspicion of their cause. As she expected, Welland believed them to have been produced by an affray between the Comanches and the fugitives.

"Whether they will return in this direction or not, why, of course, we can only conjecture. Should they do so, and even make a halt in this grove, I do not despair of escaping them. Unless,"—said he, as the thought flashed across him—"unless they have taken a prisoner, and he has told them that we have taken refuge here. I hardly think that has been done, however, and if their suspicions be not aroused, it is not even probable that they will discover us. They must have traveled a considerable distance, and will hardly reach this spot before to-morrow."

"Why not to-night?"

"They will encamp and not resume their journey until daylight."

"But it was early in the afternoon that I heard their guns, and they could have traveled a long distance since."

"Very true, but not far enough to reach us. Remember, their horses were going at their best speed, and it isn't probable they will return at that rate."

"But, Ross," said Irona, with a brightened countenance, "what need is there of our remaining here until morning? By that time we may be many miles away, and what is to hinder us from going?"

"I have thought of that course, dear Irona, but have given it up. We can gain nothing by night-traveling, while we run the risk of losing our way. As I said, a minute ago, I do not think there is any danger of the return of the Indians, for twenty hours at least. We will therefore rest contented until morning, when we will continue our journey."

"But will we not meet each other?"

"That is the great danger, as we must necessarily take nearly the same direction that they have. Our guide is the river, which here swerves to the southeast, and whose course, in all probability, has been followed by Colonel Ovaton and the others."

"As it is already dark, would it not be best to make our preparations for spending the night?"

"If you wish it. As I have just awakened, of course I have no disposition to sleep at present. It is your turn, and while you slumber, I will watch beside you. Would to Heaven that I always might," exclaimed Welland, tenderly drawing Irona to him, and kissing her fair forehead. "How my heart bleeds for you! A few months since you knew no wish ungratified; but now, by a wonderful train of circumstances indeed, you are a fugitive on the prairies for your life and honor. Kind providence I know will watch over a being as pure and as good as yourself."

"Don't think of me," responded Irona; "I am in the hands of God, and feel resigned to any fate that he may decree me. With His good will and your strong, noble heart to protect me, I need have no fear, no matter what danger threatens me."

"Irona," said Welland, modulating his own voice to the soft tones of love, "here alone on the broad prairies we should understand each other. I have told you how often I have thought of my last interview with you, and regretted the temper I then displayed. I have felt sorry for this, I say, and you have forgiven me for it. I believe we shall both escape from this country; but we may not. And now, Irona, will you not give me what I have never asked yet—the assurance that I possess the love of your heart?"

"I do, Ross—devoutly and truly," replied Irona, in a tone which indicated the depth and the purity of her love.

"I ask no more. Good-night—good-night!" was all the lover could utter as he drew her to his bosom and then led her to the spot selected for her resting-place during the night. He had made a couch of branches and shrubbery beneath some heavy bushes, which sheltered her from the night-dews. Here, folded in his thick, warm blanket, she rested as sweetly as if in her own chamber in a distant home.

Welland stationed himself a few feet distant, where, seated upon the ground, at a late hour he fell asleep and did not awaken until aroused by the

chattering of the birds overhead. Almost at the same moment Irona also awakened, and smilingly saluted him.

"A long journey is before us," said she, "and I believe we are to commence it as soon as possible."

"Very true," replied Welland, "and it will not be long before we shall be upon our way. Of course we must have our morning meal before starting."

This required but a short time, as enough remained of the evening's repast to afford them all that was needed. Welland's blanket was strapped to his back, the charges of his two rifles examined, and all pronounced ready.

"Do you feel able to walk a great distance?" he asked of Irona, as they were about to start.

"I surely do," she answered, "and as I am not incumbered by any extra weight or load, I think I shall not be the first one to give out."

"That remains to be proved," said Welland. "And now for home!"

"Wait a moment," interrupted Irona; "ought we not to examine the appearance of the prairie before venturing upon it? We know not how close at hand enemies may be."

"I should have thought of that before. Wait here till I return."

Saying this, Welland moved hastily through the grove toward the prairie. A few rods brought him to the edge of the timber, when, as he looked out on the plain, he saw, no less than a quarter of a mile distant, the whole band of Comanches galloping directly toward him. He paused scarcely a second, but long enough to assure himself that their destination was unmistakably the grove in which he was standing. He made all haste back to Irona, and communicated the astounding intelligence.

"We cannot flee, as the prairie is so open we should be discovered almost immediately. We must secrete ourselves at once. There is no time to lose. Enter the spot where you slept last night and I will pull the bushes over you, so that I think there is no danger of your being seen."

"And yourself?" asked Irona, mechanically obeying him.

"Never mind me, I will take care of myself. It would not do for us both to hide there. Quick, Irona, or it will be too late."

She crouched down in the bushes, which closed after her, in such a manner that there was no probability of her being discovered even by the lynx-eye of a Comanche, unless his suspicion was directed toward the spot. This was scarcely done when the tread of horses' feet was heard, and hardly conscious of what he did, Welland caught the limb of a tree near at hand and hastily ascended among its branches.

A moment later, and the score of Comanches entered the grove, sprung from their horses and turned them loose, while they threw themselves upon the grass for an hour's rest.

He soon saw that it was not the men he had so much cause to fear as it was their horses. The former remained nearly in the same spot where they had first placed themselves, and seemed to have no inclination to wander away; but with the latter, the case was different. In browsing and cropping the herbage, they had already approached within a few feet of Irona's hiding-place. Should these sagacious animals discover her, it was morally certain that their masters would.

The horse of a Comanche Indian is generally as intelligent as his rider, and when one makes a discovery, it is not long before he imparts it to the other. The animal, when on the war-trail, will scent danger and warn his master of it, while yet it is far distant, and when encamped, no more faithful or unerring sentinels could be found.

After an hour's rest, the war-party gave signs of moving, and now came the most critical moment of all. The Comanches gave a peculiar whistle, which brought most of their horses instantly to them; but there were several that, from some cause or other,

paid no attention to the signal. Among the latter was one which was plucking the buds and leaves from the very bushes which sheltered Irona. He obstinately refused to leave, and when Welland saw his savage master start toward him, his trepidation was so great that he could hardly maintain his position in the tree.

As the Comanche reached the animal, the latter, with a snort of alarm, retreated several steps, as though he had discovered some alarming object in the bushes before him. The Indian noticed the action, and taking his horse by the head, endeavored to lead him forward. At first the brute betrayed some fear, but gradually quieted down and slowly approached the bushes. As he reached them the Indian vaulted upon his back, and sought to urge him through them, evidently thinking there was nothing formidable there. The horse made a step or two, and then, with a wild neigh, took the bit in his teeth, and galloped off to where his companions were standing. Here the Indian yielded him up to a comrade, and dismounting, walked hurriedly toward the bushes, plainly determined to satisfy himself as to the cause of the animal's alarm.

Welland now seriously debated whether he should shoot the savage or not; but the certain consequences of such a proceeding restrained him, and tormenting as were the circumstances, he quietly watched his movements. The Comanche circled around the suspicious spot several times, and then cautiously approached it. Cocking his rifle, he reached the muzzle forward, pushed it between the leaves, and carefully gazed in. For a few seconds, which seemed minutes to the excited Welland, he stood perfectly motionless. Then with a "Ugh!" of surprise, he stooped down, took Irona by the arm, and led her forth.

CHAPTER XVII.

LOST AGAIN.

THE appearance of Irona among the Comanches, naturally created the greatest surprise and wonder. They gathered around her, questioning her captor, until he had given the particulars of her discovery, and then several proceeded to the bushes and examined them. The blanket was brought forth, and new speculations were indulged in. Irona's remarkable beauty made a great impression upon their savage hearts, and she was treated in reality with respectful consideration.

The leader of the company stepped forward before her and speaking quickly, in broken English, asked:

"Where come from?"

Irona was on the point of replying, when it occurred to her that it would be safer to feign ignorance of the English language. She would not tell a falsehood to save either the life of Welland or herself; and by refusing to answer at all, she was saved the ordeal. She therefore looked up with a wondering gaze, as though the meaning of the words was not known to her.

"Where come from?—who he?—what do here?" repeated the chief, bending his face close to hers. Still she made no reply.

"*Escucha V. lo que le digo?*" (Do you listen to what I tell you?) asked the Indian, in Spanish.

This was Irona's own language, and, as she heard its musical words uttered so fluently by the Comanche, she well-nigh forgot herself; but, as before, the questioner received no answer.

"*Habla V. el espanol o el ingles?*" (Do you speak Spanish or English?)

The Indian, receiving no answer to this second question, repeated it in English until satisfied that his prisoner either could not or would not make any reply to him. He then turned to his followers and addressed to them a few words in his own tongue. Welland instantly divined what he said from the fact that they all scattered through the grove and commenced a search. It was now time to look to his own personal safety. He went up the tree till he had

reached its densest part. Here he slid out on the limb, and lying down, with his arms and feet around it, awaited the result of the search.

From his situation he was now unable to see the movements of the Indians, but he could hear their tread through the bushes, their guttural exclamations to each other, and a word or two that the chief now and then uttered to the silent Irona. In a few moments a great clamor was heard. Welland descended as far as he dared, but could see nothing. From the direction from which the noise came, he concluded they had come upon the dead body of his unknown enemy.

The minute Irona saw them bringing the dead body to the chief, it occurred to her that she might make it do Welland a good turn. If the Comanches could be made to believe that it was the dead form of her protector, they would search no further; or, at any rate, would not have so strong a belief that any one else was at hand. She therefore covered her face with her hands, and, bending her head, her whole frame shook with emotion—a genuine emotion, but produced by far different causes than her captors believed.

This manifestation had partly the desired effect. The Comanche chief consulted with the warriors, and examined the dead hunter again and again. None had ever seen him before, although, from his dress and appearance, he was judged to be a Mexican. After a free interchange of sentiments, the conclusion reached was that the man had been shot by Colonel Ovaton or one of his men. The latter, when first seen, it will be recollected, were reined up in front of the grove, in parley with Welland. The Comanches had come down like a thunderbolt upon them, frightening them away, it was believed, before they had time to make off with Irona.

Still the chief directed the search to be continued, instructing his warriors, at the same time, *to examine the trees!* When this order was given, Welland had returned to his limb, and his arms and legs were closed around it, while he listened to the tumult below. The first intimation he had of the character which the search had taken, was when he caught the glimpse of a bronzed body fitting through the branches of a large tree a few yards away. The savage had ascended this, as his companions were doing the others. Welland could judge by the agitation made among the leaves, the position of the Indian's body. He saw him go up full fifty feet above himself, where he paused a moment, and then commenced dropping downward from limb to limb, as dexterously as a monkey could have done. When a few feet below our hero, he made a spring of nearly a dozen feet through the air, catching the branch of another tree, and going to its top with the same celerity that he had displayed before. In a few moments he was in a different tree, repeating the same maneuvers, and at the same time getting further and further from the tree which contained Welland. The reason why he failed to visit this was because it was a small one, in which he rightly judged no person would take refuge from choice. Had Welland had a few minutes longer to consider, he never would have used it for that purpose. The Comanche did bestow a searching glance upon it; but, being a considerable distance away, and having no suspicion, he failed to note the peculiar appearance of the limb which was weighed down with the weight of a man. For the space of perhaps twenty minutes Welland saw nothing more of the Indian climbers, but during all this time, he could hear them springing from limb to limb, and dropping to the ground with exclamations of disappointment. He expected every moment to see one of them coming up his own tree, and could only wonder that he had escaped observation so long.

From the manner in which the search was being conducted, he felt satisfied the tree would afford him concealment but a few minutes longer; he therefore determined to resort to stratagem to mislead the savages. The latter, at that moment, were

hunting in another part of the timber, and unless a stray one of their number should wander in that direction, they would probably not return for some minutes. The tree in which he had first seen the Comanche stood very close to his own. As this had already been searched, he concluded that if he could get into it, he would be safe, and he determined to make the attempt.

He passed out on his own branch until it bent with his weight. He had brought only his rifle with him. This he carefully tossed, so as to make it fall in a horizontal position upon the branches opposite. To his dismay, however, instead of catching and remaining, it fell end over end through the limbs to the ground. Welland crouched down and listened, but the noise made was not noticed. It had fallen a good distance from the base of the trunk, and the rank grass closing over it made him confident it would not be seen unless accidentally stepped upon.

Welland now made preparations for his leap. It was over six feet he had to spring, and then run the risk of sustaining himself by the twigs and branches of the other tree. He carefully measured the distance with his eye and leaped outward! What a thrill of horror passed through his body when, in mid-air, he saw he could not accomplish it! As he came down, he frantically clutched the branches, but they would not sustain him. They bent down, and the twigs slowly slipped through his blistered fingers. It was like a horrid nightmare—this falling—falling, without power to check himself—that dreadful sinking sensation, as though dropping into some dark pit. It was no use to attempt saving himself. Down, down he went through the limbs, and finally came to the ground in a stalling position. He glanced despairingly around, and felt a faint hope, as he saw, singularly enough, that he had not been observed. Without losing an instant, he renewed his attempt, and in a few minutes was snugly ensconced in the top of the second tree.

It was not ten minutes later that a brawny Comanche was on the very limb he had so recently left. Narrow, indeed, had been his escape—far narrower than he suspected: for the unusual appearance of the surrounding branches was noticed by the savage. He saw that they had been made by a person springing from one tree to another; and the same sagacious eye that showed him this, showed still further that whoever had made the leap had failed in its execution and had fallen to the ground. If he felt surprised that a Comanche warrior should have made such a failure, he thought nothing more. There was not enough in the circumstances to make him suspect that it might have been done by a white man, and he rejoined his companions upon the ground.

The search was now given over. Every tree and every nook that could have concealed a person had been subjected to the severest scrutiny, without revealing a white man, and the Indians were convinced that their first supposition was right. The chief mounted his horse, lifting Irona like an infant in front of him. She struggled and made signs that she wished to remain where she was, but she was in the grasp of a giant and it availed nothing. Away sped the Comanches to the northward bearing Irona Seraville with them. Welland, from his lofty position, watched them as they rapidly receded in the distance. Soon they became mere moving specks in the horizon, and finally faded altogether from view. Hour after hour he sat gazing at the point where they had disappeared. He sat motionless, despairing and hopeless. After a long time he drew a deep breath, and then looked around him.

"Gone, gone again, when I thought the danger was passed! What will become of her? God only knows. Dishonor, death to Irona Seraville! And here I have been compelled to sit and see her carried off by those inhuman savages. Her fate must be written in the book of destiny. It is no use striving against it. I will return to the United States and forget that I ever knew her! Forget that I ever

knew Irona Seraville!" repeated Welland, after a pause. "Not while memory lasts! And would I ever forget my own baseness in thus deserting her in the moment of direst necessity? Away with the thought! I will follow her as long as she lives. If she is dishonored, my life shall be spent in avenging her. If not, I shall never give over my efforts until she is rescued or I have died in the attempt."

He sat a few minutes longer in deep thought, and then added:

"What can I do? I have two rifles, it is true, but no horse to ride, while twenty Comanche warriors are opposed to me. I cannot steal into their camp and rescue her by stratagem. They are too cunning for that. But I can follow after them. There is no dreaming what opportunities may be offered me."

Ten minutes later and Welland was walking rapidly across the prairie in the trail made by the passage of the Comanche horses. In the afternoon he halted a few moments, and by night had passed over a good long distance. As he expected, the trail led up to the Colorado, which it still followed when night closed around him. He intended, when starting, to travel all night, but he had already undergone too many hardships to bear this tax upon his endurance. While looking about him, he caught the glimmer of a camp-fire in the distance on the bank of the river. This he believed undoubtedly belonged to the Comanches, and he determined to approach nigh enough to reconnoiter.

Near as seemed the camp, it required almost two hours' walking before he reached it. To his unbought surprise as he came up, not a single person was in sight. This was the more surprising, as it seemed literally impossible for twenty men and horses to conceal themselves around the fire, which was kindled down the bank where there were no trees or shelter.

Welland passed and repassed it several times, gradually approaching nearer and incautiously exposing himself. Only a faint light was cast by the smoldering embers, and within the circle of this he at length ventured. He had hardly done so, when a dark, ball-like body bounded from the darkness, and alighting on his shoulders, bore him downward with irresistible strength.

"I takes you for a white man," said a rough voice, as his throat was grasped like a vise, "but you've no business to be sneakin' round like this. Speak quick! Who mought you be?"

"I am Ross Welland; don't you know me, Ned Nuggens?"

"Him and no mistake," replied that hunter, peering down in his face and then allowing him to rise.

"Where's the gal?"

"The Comanches have got her."

"What'd I tell you, John?" said the hunter, turning toward his companion, who now made himself visible. "I know'd them ruffians had somebody among 'em that they'd no right to, when we met 'em to-day. How is it they didn't git you, too?" asked the speaker indignantly, as though Welland had no right to be free when one placed under his charge was a prisoner.

"Have patience, and you will understand it all in a moment"—and thereupon our hero explained what is already known to the reader. At its conclusion, Nuggens exclaimed:

"Just like the ruff'ns; they've got an account to settle with us; but what are *you* doing *here*?"

"I am in pursuit of them."

"Give us your hand! You've got the *stuff* in you. You'll pass, you will."

"How is it you two are here? I understood your destination was the Llano Estacado, when we parted."

"So it was—so it was; but after we'd left you some time, John, here, said he believed there was something wrong going on, and the next morning we turned back to follow you. That night we found your horse. Then we *know'd* something was up, *sure*. We went down on this side of the river, and

not thinking of looking in the river for you, why we didn't see you on that island that you just told us about. We went on and hunted for you two or three days, and then thinking we mought have passed you, we took the back-track again. But we couldn't see nothing of you, cause, like a couple of fools, we had got on the wrong side of the river. So we give it up and started for the Staked Plain, and have got this far on the way."

"You say you found my horse some time since. What did you do with him?"

"Why, kept him, of course. Such animals are too scarce to let slip."

"And is he in your possession this minute?"

"If you don't believe it just walk out there where our two animals is standing. Being we've found his owner, he's no longer ours."

"Such a turn of fortune I am forced to believe is an augury of my success—"

"Is what?" interrupted Smith.

"Is a sign—a token of success in my efforts to rescue Irona."

"Oh!—that's what you mean. Don't use them big words around these parts—'cause why? no one can't swallow 'em. But say yee, you don't really mean to follow them twenty Comanches alone, do you?"

"If I started on foot with that firm intention, what would I induce me to give it up now that I have recovered my horse?"

"What can you do among such a lot of ruffians?"

"The chances are greatly against me, I will admit, but I should never forgive myself did I not make an effort."

"Can your horse travel faster than theirs?"

"He is fully the equal."

"That don't matter—'pose you get the gal—which *you* never will—how are you going to get away from them twenty chances?"

"As I have just said, the chances are desperate, but I shall make the effort."

"All alone, eh?"

"I expect to do so."

"Wal, I expect you won't."

"Why not?" asked Welland, thinking that perhaps they intended to prevent him.

"'Cause we goes with you!" exclaimed Nuggens heartily. "When that little gal of yours gets into difficulty why I reckons we does too, and stays there too till she's out. Eh, Smith?"

"Just so—exactly."

"Let's shake hands on that."

And Welland grasped hands with the two hunters.

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE COMANCHE CAMP.

THIS much then was settled—three armed and mounted white men were to pursue twenty armed and mounted Comanche Indians, with the object of rescuing a captive white girl from them. A fool-hardy proceeding, to say the least; but, curiously enough, Ned Nuggens, who always saw the dark side of the picture, was very sanguine of success.

"I have an idea of my own," said he with a wise look, the next morning, as they were about to start.

"Pray, let us know what it is," asked Welland, with some curiosity.

"Can't do it jest now," he replied, with a shake of his head. "You'd all laugh at me, sure."

"Tell a feller if he guesses?" quizzed Smith, leaning on his horse and looking up in his companion's face.

"Yas, don't know but what I will."

"Is it to buy her?"

"Buy her! Where'd I get anything to buy her with?" asked Nuggens, in amazement.

"That's what I should like to know. You going to make a dash among 'em do some ha'r-raisin', and be off like a thunder-bolt?"

"Nothin' of the kind."

"Going to sneak into camp and steal her?"

"You're all wrong ag'in."

"Going to lecture 'em?—tell 'em they're bad boys and shouldn't do such things?"

"No, sir; but I'll say that last guess is the nearest you've come yet."

"Wh-e-w-w!" exclaimed Smith, giving vent to a long, peculiar whistle. "Going to appeal to their better natur', I s'pose. Haint you been on the prairies long enough yet to find out that Comanches ain't human?"

"No," replied Nuggens, with a meaning emphasis.

"Wal, I have, and if you haint you will, mighty soon."

"I know not what plan you have in view," said Welland, "but if you are certain of its success, I am perfectly satisfied. With that assurance, I shall go forward with renewed hope."

"It's impossible to be sart'in with Comanches; but I feel very sart'in—so much so, that if I don't succeed I lose my ha'r, sure."

Nuggens seemed to enjoy the astonishment his words created. He added, with a meaning smile:

"I'll say this much, though I don't choose to tell you more. The plan that I've hit upon doesn't bring either of you in the scrape. For that matter, you could both just as well stay where you are, and let me go on alone. But, let us lose no more time talking. We shall have a good tramp to overtake them Injuns."

Nuggens galloped ahead, and the two followed on a brisk canter. He gave it as his opinion that the Comanches would be overtaken at night, provided they kept up their own swinging pace. The trail still led along the Colorado, and he felt confident that it would continue so for many miles. A few hours' ride brought them upon the site of their last encampment, the embers of whose fires were still burning. The surrounding signs were carefully examined by the hunters, and the Indians pronounced to be nearer than was first supposed.

"At this gait," said Nuggens, "we'll be onto 'em by the middle of the afternoon. They've made quite a halt here."

"Do they always keep up that rapid canter of theirs?"

"Bless you, no. Their animals get tired as well as others. They sometimes halt for three or thirty hours just as the notion takes them."

"The Comanches are the acknowledged sovereigns of this section, I believe?"

"They're the *soverigns*—if that means the masters—though they find that question is often disputed with them. They do pretty much as they please, especially where Mexicans are concerned. The Texans are tougher customers."

"It always seemed singular to me that the Mexicans bore the continual aggressions of these Bedouins, as I have heard them called. A firm stand would scatter them to the winds, although they are as good riders and warriors as you can find on this continent."

"That's true, what you've said; but the Mexicans are all cowards—that's what makes things as they are. Santa Anna and all their leaders are cowards, and the Comanches know it and despise 'em."

"They can be at no great distance ahead of us. Will it not be running a great risk to come unexpectedly upon them?"

"We ain't going to do that thing."

"It strikes me that we cannot very well help it, if we keep up this rate."

"You're mistaken. We'll come in sight of them as near the middle of the afternoon as it can be."

"Do you intend to resort to that original idea of yours immediately, or to wait until night?"

"I'll do it at once; there is no stratagem or sneak-in' about it."

Despite the maneuvers to which Smith resorted, he could not induce Nuggens to give an inkling of his plan. Several times the latter laughed to himself, as though mightily pleased with it. Then he would shake his head and look serious.

"I said there was no stratagem, as you call it, in the thing; but there is, and if the old Comanche chief finds it out, why it'll be all up with Ned Nuggens. I'm in for it, however, and the try will be made."

"Thunder and lightning!" exclaimed Smith, in a great fury, "if you ain't going to tell a feller what it is, don't say nothing more about it."

He paused a moment, as if expecting a reply, and then added:

"No one wants to know what your smart idee is, that you're making such a fuss over."

Even this failed to secure the desired information.

Indulging now and then in laughing conversation, in speculations and flings at Nuggens's "plan," our three friends continued on a rapid canter, pressing their horses forward as much as they dared. Noon came and passed, but they halted not, except to let their animals drink from the river. Their way still kept along the banks of this, and the trail of the Comanches was plainly visible, as it had not been disturbed by man or animal.

In the course of an hour or so Nuggens dismounted, and examined the footprints of the horses.

"What's the sign?" asked Smith.

"All right—ain't fur off."

Another hour they galloped on, when another examination was made.

"How is it now?"

"Close onto 'em," replied Nuggens, remounting.

"How close?"

"Half an hour, or thereabout."

"Have they encamped?"

"Don't know; guess not at this time of day."

As the time advanced, the three began to ride more cautiously, keeping a bright lookout for the Comanches. But the half-hour came and passed, and they were not seen. Smith waited some time longer, when, feeling a little disappointed, he remarked:

"The half-hour has passed long ago, Ned; where's the Indians?"

"Have patience; we'll soon see 'em."

"You shouldn't have said we'd see 'em in half an hour if you wasn't so sure."

"You needn't fret, Smith, for they are in sight this minute."

At this startling announcement, Smith and Welland reined in their horses, rose in their stirrups, and looked searchingly ahead. Nuggens had spoken the truth—the Comanches were in sight. They were still at a great distance, however, and were on an easy gallop. An inexperienced person would have taken them for a flock of prairie hens, or larger animals. Their heads and shoulders only were visible as they sunk and rose on the swell of the prairie, and these appeared thus insignificant.

"How long, at this rate, will it take us to overhaul them?" asked Welland.

"Not afore night, I'm afraid; they're a good ways off, and traveling at a rousing pace. They've made a long halt somewhere, or we'd never come up to them as soon as this."

"I should think they would stop riding *some time*. Have they no destination, or are they always riding from place to place?"

"They're nearly always riding, but they have their houses, like other folks. There's a big Comanche village about fifty miles further up the river, and that is where this crowd belongs. They're aiming for the spot."

"Why not wait till they are at home?" asked Welland, with some curiosity.

"My hair wouldn't be worth a beaver-skin by that time. No, sir," added Nuggens, emphatically. "I must be among them ruffins this afternoon or this night, or that gal is gone forever."

"Our animals can travel faster," said Smith, striking his into a more rapid gallop. The others did the same, and in a short time it was plain they were gaining rapidly upon the Indians. Their bodies and horses were visible, and it was then that

the three whites were called upon to admire the splendid riding of these Western Bedouins. The whole twenty had fallen into column side by side, and the rise and fall of their bodies, together with the rapid motions of their horses, were as regular and harmonious as the movements of a platoon of infantry.

As night approached, our friends had gained so much on the Comanches that, at Nuggens's suggestion, they drew down into a walk. It had been his wish, at first, to overtake them at dusk; but he had changed his mind, and said all now depended upon not being seen before that time. The better to avoid this, they let them shoot ahead several miles, when the three rode down the river bank and cautiously made their way up-stream.

Several miles were thus passed, when the darkness had so increased that they again rode upon the prairie, and took the trail of the Comanches. The latter were not visible; but our friends had ridden only a short time when a red light suddenly flamed up on the plain, a mile or so in advance.

"There's the camp!" exclaimed Nuggens, joyously.

Dark, shadowy forms could be seen flitting backward and forward before the fire, and now and then a guttural exclamation was borne to them on the night-wind. It was plain that the Comanches had no fear of attack in this remote section. Their horses were turned loose, and were busy cropping the grass, while confusion reigned in the camp. Ten determined enemies could have made a terrible havoc among those twenty Indians; but the latter well knew there were no ten enemies at hand.

Nuggens prepared at once to venture among the Comanches. His preparations were slight, and consisted in nothing but dismounting and passing his rifle to Welland. The latter noticed a tremor in the motions of the hunter, though he did his best to hide it. The critical moment had come, and he comprehended the perilous nature of the undertaking he had ventured upon.

"Good-by, boys," said he, taking the hand of each; "if I ain't back by the end of an hour, you'll know I won't—well, I won't be back at all."

"You expect to return, do you not?"

"I hope I shall; but—but it ain't certain, by any means."

"Well, God go with you."

And the hunter was gone.

Smith and Welland remained seated on their horses, gazing toward the Indian camp, awaiting the moment when Nuggens would make his appearance there. The latter moved directly forward without the slightest attempt to conceal his approach, and it was not many minutes before the two knew by the commotion among the Comanches that he had arrived among them.

And now commenced the hour of suspense.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

LEAVING Smith and Welland a prey to the most anxious suspense, we will follow the hunter into the Comanche camp.

He walked directly toward the camp-fire, as we have stated, and as it was but a hundred yards distant, it required but a few moments to reach it. A visit was so unexpected by the Indians that he was not noticed until he was really among them. Several at once drew their knives and closed around him, and for a moment or two his life was in danger.

"What seek you?" he asked, in the Comanche tongue. "I come among you unarmed. I am on a visit to your chief, Riantonon. I would see Riantonon."

At mention of their leader's name, considerable wonder was created among those immediately surrounding the hunter.

"Do you seek the mighty Riantonon?" said one,

stepping toward him. Nuggens merely signified his assent.

"He is by the other fire. Follow me!"

The savage moved off, and his companions made way for their visitor to follow him. A few yards brought them to the second fire, around which several Indians were reclining.

"One who asks for Riantonon," said the guide, stepping aside, and allowing Nuggens to advance to the fire. As he did so, a large, powerful, and not unhandsome Indian arose to receive him.

"Is it the great and good Riantonon that I see before me?" asked Nuggens, with a low obeisance.

"I am Riantonon, chief of the Comanches," returned the Indian, in a voice that sounded like the rumble of thunder.

"I am from Maxalhon," said Nuggens, with another obeisance.

"The road to my white brother's house is long, and it must be an important wish that brings his messenger hither."

"It is an important errand, the object of which has possessed Maxalhon for many days and nights."

Although the chief was curious to learn the cause of this singular visit, he was too much of an Indian to betray any vulgar curiosity. To avoid showing a weakness, he purposely prevented the conversation from coming to a point.

"The path that my brother has traveled is a rough one. He may rest with us till morning."

"The commands of my master are that I set out on my return to-night."

"My warriors are preparing food. My brother must be hungry."

"My rifle is true, and I have not wanted for food."

"But I see no arms."

"I need no weapons in approaching the camp of Riantonon. They are a short distance away, with my horse."

"Does not my brother desire rest before telling his wish?"

"I have ridden, and am not tired."

A silence of several seconds, when Nuggens, judging that the proper moment had arrived, said:

"A girl—a beautiful young white girl was stolen some time since by the red-men. She was the dear friend of Maxalhon."

"His child?" asked the chief quickly.

"Not his child, but one that he loved as much as his child. He mourns night and day for her."

"Why does he send for Riantonon?"

"Riantonon is the leader of a strong and valiant band of warriors. He asks that he will search for the child and bring her to him. He will give all his possessions for her."

This remark seemed to affect the chief, for he remained for a moment as if in deep thought, while Nuggens, with his head bent, dared not look up in his face.

"Riantonon knows not who stole the child. How can he find her?"

"Maxalhon said that Riantonon and his warriors lived upon the plains and wandered hundreds of miles. Nothing could escape his eye."

This compliment, so delicately given, had its effect upon the chief. He felt gratified, and replied:

"Maxalhon spoke the truth. Nothing can escape the eye of Riantonon."

"Will he find and return the child?"

"He will," said the chief, decidedly.

"Maxalhon will then thank him with tears in his eyes, and Riantonon will receive vast wealth."

"My brother will stay with us till morning?"

"I must return with the good news, and make the heart of Maxalhon glad with the words of Riantonon."

With this Nuggens made a movement as if to depart, but the chief commanded him to wait a few moments. The hunter suspected what was coming, but, of course, he affected ignorance. He heard the approach of some one, and looking up saw Irona led forward by the chief.

"Here is the captive whom you seek," said the chief.

Nuggens exhibited the most profound astonishment and joy. He stepped forward, seized the hands of Irona, and congratulated her again and again upon her rescue, during the performance of which he managed to put her on her guard. The quick-witted girl needed no caution, for she saw a ruse was being played, and understood how to act her part.

"Great and good is Riantonon," said Nuggens. "Maxalhon will pray to see him."

"Are you alone?" asked the chief, pointedly.

"Two hunters were sent with me to protect me, and they are waiting a short distance away."

The chief shook his head.

"The path is long, and there is danger at every turn. My warriors will accompany you."

Now this, above all things, was the very proceeding which the hunter felt he must prevent. If the chief gave him an escort, all would be lost, for the trick that he had played would soon be discovered.

"We have come through many dangers, and we can return through them. I am sure Maxalhon would not permit the good Riantonon to send his warriors with us."

"When does my brother return?"

"At once. A long distance may be gained before morning."

"Has my brother brought a horse for the captive?"

"I did not expect to find her, and therefore have none."

The chief spoke in a low voice, and one of the Indians led forward a magnificent coal-black horse, which he helped Irona to mount. The Comanche leader himself then led the animal forward and placed the bridle in the hand of the hunter.

"Tell Maxalhon that when the moon is again at her full, Riantonon will visit him."

Nuggens bowed and walked slowly away from the camp-fire, leading Irona's horse. He did not hasten his walk, nor speak, nor even look up to her; but he endured the keenest agony, fearful that the chief would suspect something wrong and call him back. In such a case he knew all was lost. Then he fancied he was followed and dared not look behind him; and then again his heart beat with hope as he reflected how well his bold scheme had succeeded, and how completely he had duped the Comanches.

Great was the amazement of Welland and Smith when Nuggens and Irona made their appearance among them.

"Don't stop to talk, boys," said the former, "there's no time. Let's be off."

He vaulted into his own saddle and struck off on a gallop, followed by the others. Welland took his position beside Irona. He said nothing, but reached over and took her hand for a moment. She returned the pressure he gave, and the party rode on in silence. In the course of an hour or so, Nuggens reined his horse down to a walk and said:

"Our animals are tired, for they have done a good heap of traveling. So here we may now halt for the night."

He turned down the river-bank as he spoke, and leaped to the ground. All removed their saddles, the horses were picketed, and a fire started.

"We're safe from *them* Comanches, at least," said Nuggens, "and now we'll take a rest till daylight."

Irona, by this time, had had so much experience in "camping out," that she was provided for without difficulty. As she slept, the others gathered around the fire, and Welland said:

"Your plan has been tried, and has succeeded, Nuggens, and therefore there can be no danger of our laughing at or ridiculing it. I trust you will not hesitate to give it to us."

"Yes, in course, let's have it," added Smith.

The hunter laughed to himself a moment, and then answered:

"It's a little the best trick, I fancy, that a Comanche was ever served. That Riantonon is a full-blooded Indian and a regular ruff'n. He's scalped and hacked up more white people than any man this side of the Rio Grande. Well, he's got a half-brother, a half breed, who's as big a ruff'n as he is himself. His name is Maxalhon, and he lives down on the San Antonio, where he's got a big farm and a plenty of horses and cattle, all of which he's got by robbing honest people. He used to travel with that old Comanche ruff'n, but he got so rich at length that he settled down, as I've said. Riantonon often brings his stolen people down to his place, where he sometimes allows 'em to be ransomed, but not always by no means. He gives the old chief all he wants, and so you see the chief, natural enough, will do anything for him. This I've know'd for over six years. When me and Smith see the Comanches, I felt pretty sure that they was Riantonon's band, 'cause he always takes just twenty with him counting himself. I've met 'em before, and have had such scrimmages with 'em that I couldn't very well forget him or his men if I wanted to, though I haven't met him so long that I felt pretty sart'in that he wouldn't know me, 'cause besides, I've let a big lot of beard grow out on my face since then. Wal, when you come along yesterday and let us know what a muss the gal there was in, I see we couldn't do nothing by force, and the only way was to pull the wool over the eyes of the old ruff'n. I know'd if I could make him believe I was from Maxalhon he would do anything I wished. The great danger was that he would see who I was, and suspicion something; but when I talked with him I kept my head pretty well down. I see four Injins there, and every one showed scars on his face that I helped make, but they didn't know it. I talked away to Riantonon, and the end of the matter was that he believed I was sent from his old brother ruff'n Maxalhon. He give me the gal, and if she isn't safe home in a short time it will be her own fault."

"Hal ha! what a plan!" laughed Smith.

"Didn't I say you'd laugh at it?" asked Nuggens, reproachfully.

"True, we laugh," added Welland, smiling, "but not at you, nor exactly at your cleverly managed scheme, but at the credulity of the chief and his warriors."

The night passed away without incident, and, at the earliest appearance of light, our four friends were riding down the banks of the Colorado. Not a sign of an Indian was seen during the day, and by night they had accomplished a good long distance. On the second, Nuggens descried a war-party on the opposite side of the river, who made some demonstrations toward crossing over and engaging them; but they seemed to reach a different conclusion, upon second thought, and shortly afterward disappeared on the prairie.

On the morning of the third day, they reached the grove where Irona and Welland had become separated. They felt relieved when it was left behind them. Of all their experiences, there had been none more painful than that spot had witnessed. Passing several frontier settlements—or rather the commencement of frontier settlements—our friends at last beheld the picturesque town of Austin before them. It was with a feeling of joy indescribable that our hero and heroine rode into the place. Irona led the way to her uncle's, but ere they had reached his mansion, the two hunters halted.

"Here we leave you," said Nuggens.

"What!" exclaimed Welland, "you must surely go with us to Irona's relations. You have had a long ride and need rest."

"We're used to that," laughed Smith, "and don't need rest."

"I shall never be forgiven if I fail to let my uncle see you," added Irona; "besides, I promised you a reward—"

"None of that," interrupted Nuggens. "What little we've done was out of good-will to you, and we

doesn't take pay for *such* work. We thank you as much as if we took up with your offer. We'd like to do it, *but we can't* if we wanted. So here's a good-by to both. P'raps we'll see you ag'in, as we sometimes bring up in Orleans, and," pursued the hunter with a meaning smile, "I s'pose you two will have a place of your own pre'ty soon. Then you may be sure we'll call on you."

"Do not fail to inquire for me. I shall always be glad to see those to whom, under Heaven, I owe the life of Irona."

"Good-by."

The parting would have been affecting, if the hunters had only allowed it to be so; but they would not. They cheerfully shook hands, and as they rode away, repeated their laughing adieus. Neither Welland nor Irona ever saw or heard of them again.

A few minutes later, and the two were received at the mansion of Albert Seraville, where the reappearance of Irona was like the dead coming to life. Her uncle himself was at home, and went nearly crazy with delight. Irona learned, to her extreme joy, that the fact of her abduction had been carefully kept from her father. Her uncle had offered large rewards for her recovery, and more than one band of hunters, at that very moment, were scouring the plains in search of her. Welland, of course, received a most genuine and hearty welcome, and unknown to him, Albert Seraville placed a letter in Irona's hands for his brother, in which he was eloquent in the praises of the "young American," and which he felt confident would do much toward removing the prejudice he entertained against him.

The two remained in Austin for a few days only, when they took passage to Matagorda. Here they were compelled to wait a week before the opportunity offered for reaching New Orleans. Finally, they secured berths on board a steamer, and the next morning were far out in the bright water of the Gulf of Mexico.

The passage across this piece of water was without incident worthy of note, until they reached a point off Vermilion Bay, in Louisiana, not many miles west of the entrance to the Mississippi. The weather was extremely hot, and many of the passengers remained on deck through the night in preference to spending them in their berths. Welland kept his room for several hours, when, finding it intolerable, he arose and passed on deck. He found a number slowly pacing backward and forward, engaged in meditation, while others were standing together and admiring the beautiful scenery around them. The prospect indeed was magnificent. The shore was so distant that the view on every hand was bounded by water. A few clouds were straggling across the sky, and the state of the atmosphere was such that the surface of the gulf seemed to reflect more light than was shed upon it. Here and there the white sails of some vessels were visible, like the plumage of some gigantic sea-bird, while the black hull and tapering masts seemed as if drawn with ink in the misty air. Occasionally one of these vessels would suddenly loom up before them, approach as if about to ride them down, then glide majestically by with no sound but the water as it was dashed from the prow, and with its course marked for a moment by a broad path of phosphorescent foam. Silently they met and silently they passed each other, never to meet or pass again, for the steamer that encountered them was approaching its doom!

Welland, after gazing upon the scene for some time, turned and commenced pacing the deck. He had taken several turns, when, in wheeling rather sooner than usual, he came in collision with some one behind him.

"*Carrai!*" muttered the latter person.

"Your pardon, friend. I— My heaven!"

The person before him was Juarez Vasquelon!

"In the name of heaven, what brings you here?" demanded Welland, with a recoil of amazement.

"Your pardon," said the imperturbable Spaniard, lifting his hat. "I did not anticipate the pleasure of meeting Senor Welland here."

"No, I suppose not; you believed the Comanches had finished me."

"Is Senorita Irona well?"

The provoking coolness of the villain tempted Welland to strike him, but he reflected that such an act could do him no good, as there was no further occasion for plotting and counter-plotting against him. He could well afford to be condescending.

"She is well; far better, I may venture to say, both in body and spirits, than when she saw you last."

"I am rejoiced to hear it; she has truly had much suffering."

"For the greatest part of which Juarez Vasquelon is to be thanked."

"I hope she will find her dear father well," added the Spaniard, without noticing the pointed allusion of Welland.

"Do your friends, Pierre and Colonel Ovaton, accompany you?" asked the latter, after a moment's pause.

"They are both dead."

Our hero could not conceal his astonishment at this remark.

"Both dead," added Vasquelon, in a business-like manner, "from the hands of the Comanches."

"Were they killed by Riantonon and his band?"

"They were killed by Riantonon and his band."

"And how was it that you escaped?"

"My horse chanced to possess such speed that the Indians could not overtake him, though I must say they tried very hard."

"Did you see Ovaton and Pierre killed?"

"Not exactly; but I saw their horses give out nearly at the same time, and that, you know, was just the same."

"What a pity yours did not do the same," muttered Welland.

"You go to New Orleans, I presume, Senor Welland?"

"That is my intention," replied our hero, turning away and leaving him to himself.

Upon reflection, Welland came to the conclusion that this meeting with Vasquelon was without design upon the part of the latter. The fact that he had not seen him before, showed that he had purposely kept out of sight. He resolved to say nothing of their interview to Irona, until they had arrived in New Orleans. As Vasquelon seemed willing to answer any questions, he made inquiries in regard to Jacques. The Spaniard informed him that when he learned of Welland's flight and that he was to be pursued, he requested to be left behind, promising to follow in a day or two as he was nearly recovered; but, from what Vasquelon remarked, Welland believed the true-hearted fellow had done this as a ruse to get rid of them, and in all probability, after their departure had made his way back to the settlements.

A few days later, and the steamer entered one of the many mouths of the Mississippi, and commenced the ascent of that mighty river. It was found to be much higher than usual, and the current so swift

that the progress of the boat was wearily slow. Welland had seen Vasquelon several times, but they had no further conversation than that referred to.

On the second morning after their entrance of the Mississippi, before many of the passengers had arisen, the steamer exploded her boiler. The explosion was terrific, the upper deck being blown upward, and the sides hurled apart in shattered fragments, with as much force as though the boiler were a gigantic bomb-shell. At the very moment of the dire catastrophe, Welland was standing in conversation with one of the passengers at the bow. Amid the general wreck of flying fragments and human beings, they found themselves floating on a large box, while the screams of dying men and women were all around them in the water. To save himself, the companion of Welland succeeded in working their raft some yards from the hulk of the steamer, where they were beyond the reach of the sinking wretches. So soon as Welland comprehended his situation, he resigned his hold of the raft and swam toward the boat in search of Irona. Twice he was seized by a drowning man and carried under, but he succeeded in freeing himself and passed around the debris without seeing her. When about to despair, he heard his name called, and turning his head, saw her clinging to a door. He hastened to her, and taking hold of it, commenced working his way clear of the mass that surrounded them.

"Are you scalded or burnt?" he asked.

"I am not injured at all; how is it with you?"

"I am not hurt either. Yonder, I see, is a steamer, approaching, so that those who have escaped need not despair."

Such was the case. The explosion had been seen by a passing steamboat, which was now making all haste to relieve the sufferers. Welland had floated several rods away from the struggling bodies, when he saw Vasquelon swimming toward him. He was debating within himself whether to allow him to take hold of the support of Irona, when he saw him throw up his arms.

"Good by, Senorita Irona, and—"

The closing water drowned the rest of his words.

"He is dead at last," said Welland, in a whisper, "and I am glad that it is not by my hand."

The steamer, by this time, had reached the spot, and her boats were picking up those who were still floating on the water. Welland and Irona were soon rescued, and that night reached New Orleans.

We pass over the amazement of Don Alfredo Seraville upon receiving his daughter, and upon learning from her the incredible experience which had been her lot during the past two months; we omit his expressions of thankfulness and his declaration that she should never more leave his roof; we do not record his perplexity upon reading his cherished brother's letter; but we do say, in this last paragraph of this little volume, that his prejudice in regard to one American at least, was removed forever and that to-day were his daughter wedded to the king of Spain, he could not be more rejoiced than he is in the fact that her husband was born, like herself, on American soil, and that the old Castilian line of the Seravilles is ended.

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